MARTHA BY-THE-DAY

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8-19-21

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MARTHA AND CUPID,
MAKING OVER MARTHA

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS

COPYRIGHT, 1912,
BY
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

Published August, 1912
Reprinted September, October (twice), December, 1912
February, March, April, August, November, December, 1913
January, May, August, October, December, 1914

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CHAPTER I

IF you are one of the favored few, privileged to ride in chaises, you may find the combination of Broadway during the evening rush-hour, in a late November storm, stimulating—you may, that is, provided you have a reliable driver. If, contrariwise, you happen to be of the class whose fate it is to travel in public conveyances (and lucky if you have the price!) and the car, say, won't stop for you—why——

Claire Lang had been standing in the drenching wet at the street-crossing for fully ten minutes. The badgering crowd had been shouldering her one way, pushing her the other, until, being a stranger and not very big, she had become so bewildered that she lost her head completely, and, with the blind impulse of a hen with paresis, darted straight out, in amidst the crush of traffic, with all the chances strong in favor of her being instantly trampled under foot, or ground under wheel, and never a one to know how it had happened.

An instant, and she was back again in her old place upon the curbstone. Something like the firm iron grip of a steam-derrick had fastened on her person, hoisted her neatly up, and set her as precisely down, exactly where she had started from.

It took her a full second to realize what had happened. Then, quick as a flash, anger flamed up in her pale cheeks, blazed in her tired eyes. For, of course, this was an instance of "insult" described by "the family at home" as common to the experience of unprotected girls in New York City. She groped about in her mind for the formula to be applied in such cases, as recommended by Aunt Amelia. "Sir, you are no gentleman! If you were a gentleman, you would not offer an affront to a young, defenseless girl who——" The rest eluded her; she could not recall it, try as she would. In desperate resolve to do her duty anyway, she tilted back her umbrella, whereat a fine stream of water poured from the tip directly over her upturned face, and trickled cheerily down the bridge of her short nose.

"Sir——" she shouted resolutely, and then she stopped, for, plainly, her oration was, in the premises, a misfit—the person beside her—the one of the mortal effrontery and immortal grip, being a—woman. A woman of masculine proportions, towering, deep-chested, large-limbed, but with a

face which belied all these, for in it her sex shone forth in a motherliness unmistakable, as if the world at large were her family, and it was her business to see that it was generously provided for, along the pleasantest possible lines for all concerned.

"What car?" the woman trumpeted, gazing down serenely into Claire's little wet, anxious, upturned face at her elbow.

"Columbus Avenue."

The stranger nodded, peering down the glistening, wet way, as if she were a skipper sighting a ship.

"My car, too! First's Lexin'ton—next Broadway—then—here's ours!" Again that derrick-grip, and they stood in the heart of the maelstrom, but apparently perfectly safe, unassailable.

"They won't stop," Claire wailed plaintively. "I've been waiting for ages. The car'll go by! You see if it won't!"

It did, indeed, seem on the point of sliding past, as all the rest had done, but of a sudden the motorman vehemently shut off his power, and put on his brake. By some hidden, mysterious force that was in her, or the mere commanding dimensions of her frame, Claire's companion had brought him to a halt.

She lifted her charge gently up on to the step,

pausing herself, before she should mount the platform, to close the girl's umbrella.

"Step lively! Step lively!" the conductor urged insistently, reaching for his signal-strap.

The retort came calmly, deliberately, but with perfect good nature. "Not on your life, young man. I been steppin' lively all day, an' for so long's it's goin' to take this car to get to One-hundred-an'-sixteenth Street, my time ain't worth no more'n a settin' hen's."

The conductor grinned in spite of himself. "Well, mine *is,*" he declared, while with an authoritative finger he indicated the box into which Claire was to drop her fare.

"So all the other roosters think," the woman let fall with a tolerant smile, while she diligently searched in her shabby purse for five cents.

Claire, in the doorway, lingered.

"Step right along in, my dear! Don't wait for me," her friend advised, closing her teeth on a dime, as she still pursued an elusive nickel. "Step right along in, and sit down anywheres, an' if there ain't nowheres to sit, why, just take a waltz-step or two in the direction o' some of them elegant gen'lemen's feet, occupyin' the places meant for ladies, an' if they don't get up for love of *you,* they'll get up for love of their shins."

Still the girl did not pass on.

"Fare, please!" There was a decided touch of asperity in the conductor's tone. He glared at Claire almost menacingly.

Her lip trembled, the quick tears sprang to her eyes. She hesitated, swallowed hard, and then brought it out with a piteous gulp.

"I *had* my fare—'twas in my glove. It must have slipped out. It's gone—lost—and——"

A tug at the signal-strap was the conductor's only comment. He was stopping the car to put her off, but before he could carry out his purpose the woman had dropped her dime into the box with a sounding click.

"Fare for two!" she said, "an' if I had time, an' a place to sit, I'd turn you over acrost my knee, an' give you two, for fair, young man, for the sake of your mother who didn't learn you better manners when you was a boy!" With which she laid a kind hand upon Claire's heaving shoulder, and impelled her gently into the body of the car, already full to overflowing.

For a few moments the girl had a hard struggle to control her rising sobs, but happily no one saw her working face and twitching lips, for her companion had planted herself like a great bulwark between her and the world, shutting her off, walling her 'round. Then, suddenly, she found herself placed in a hurriedly vacated seat, from which she could look up into the benevolent face inclined

toward her, and say, without too much danger of breaking down in the effort:

"I really *did* have it—the money, you know. Truly, I'm not a——"

"O, pooh! Don't you worry your head over a little thing like that. Such accidents is liable to occur in the best-reggerlated fam'lies. They do in mine, shoor!"

"But, you see," quavered the uncertain voice, "I haven't any more. That's all I had, so I can't pay you back, and——"

It was curious, but just here another passenger hastily rose, vacating the seat next Claire's, and leaving it free, whereat her companion compressed her bulky frame into it with a sigh, as of well-earned rest, and remarked comfortably, "*Now* we can talk. You was sayin'—what was it? About that change, you know. It was all you had. You mean *by* you, of course."

Claire's pale, pinched face flushed hotly. "No, I don't," she confessed, without lifting her downcast eyes.

Her companion appeared to ponder this for a moment, then quite abruptly she let it drop.

"My name's Slawson," she observed. "Martha Slawson. I go out by the day. Laundry-work, housecleaning, general chores. I got a husband an' four children, to say nothing of a mother-in-law who lives with us, an' keeps an eye

on things while me an' Sammy (that's Mr. Slawson) is out workin', an' lucky if it's an eye itself, for it's not a hand, I can tell you that. What's your name, if I may make so bold?"

"Claire Lang. My people live in Grand Rapids—where the furniture and carpet-sweepers come from," with a wistful, faint little attempt at a smile. "My father was judge of the Supreme Court, but he had losses, and then he died, and there wasn't much of anything left, and so——"

"You come to New York to make your everlastin' fortune, an' you——"

Claire Lang shook her head, completing the unfinished sentence. "No, I haven't made it, that is, not yet. But I'm not discouraged. I don't mean to give up. Things look pretty dark just now, but I'm not going to let that discourage me—— No, indeed! I'm going to be brave and courageous, and never say die, even if—even if——"

"Turn 'round, an' pertend you're lookin' out of the winder," suggested Mrs. Slawson confidentially. "The way folks stare, you'd think the world was full of nothin' but laughin' hyeenyas. Dontcher care, my dear! Well for some of 'em, if they could shed an honest tear or two themselves, oncet in a while, instead of bein' that brazen; 'twouldn't be water at all, but

Putzes Pomady it'd take to make an impression on 'em, an' don't you forget it. There! That's right! Now, no one can observe what's occurrin' in your face, an' I can talk straight into your ear, see? What I was goin' to say *is,* that bein' a mother myself an' havin' children of my own to look out for, I couldn't recommend any lady, let alone one so young an' pretty as you, to take up with strangers, here in New York City, be they male or be they female. No, certaintly not! But in this case, you can take it from me, I'm O. K. I can give the highest references. I worked for the best fam'lies in this town, ever since I was a child. You needn't be a mite afraid. I'm just a plain mother of a fam'ly an', believe *me,* you can trust me as you would trust one of your own relations, though I do say it as shouldn't, knowin' how queer *own relations* can be and *is,* when put to it at times. So, if you happen to be in a hole, my dear, without friends or such things in the city, you feel free to turn to, or if you seem to stand in need of a word of advice, or—anything else, why, dontcher hesitate a minute. It'd be a pretty deep hole Martha Slawson couldn't see over the edge of, be sure of that, even if she did have to stand on her toes to do it. Holes is my specialty, havin' been in an' out, as you might say, all my life—particularly *in.*"

Judicious or not, Claire told her story. It was

not a long one. Just the everyday experience of a young girl coming to a strange city, without influence, friends, or money, expecting to make her way, and finding that way beset with difficulties, blocked by obstacles.

"I've done everything I could think of, honestly I have," she concluded apologetically. "I began by trying for big things; art-work in editorial offices (everybody liked my art-work in Grand Rapids!). But 'twas no use. Then I took up commercial drawing. I got what looked like a good job, but the man gave me one week's pay, and that's all I could ever collect, though I worked for him over a month. Then I tried real estate. One firm told me about a woman selling for them who cleared, oh, I don't know how-much-a-week, in commissions. Something queer must be the matter with me, I guess, for I never got rid of a single lot, though I walked my feet off. I've tried writing ads., and I've directed envelopes. I've read the Wants columns, till it seems as if everybody in the world was looking for a *job*. But I can't get anything to do. I guess God doesn't mean me to die of starvation, for you wouldn't believe how little I've had to eat all summer and fall, and yet I'm almost as strong and hearty as ever. But lately I haven't been able to make any money at all, not five cents, so I couldn't pay my board, and they—

they told me at the house where I live, that I'd have to square up to-night, or I couldn't keep my room any longer. They took my trunk a week ago. I haven't had anything to wear except these clothes I have on, since, and they're pretty wet now—and—and—I've nowhere to go, and it *is* pouring so hard, and I should have been put off the car if you hadn't——"

Mrs. Slawson checked the labored flow with a hand upon the girl's knee. "Where did you say your boardin'-house is?" she inquired abruptly.

"Ninety-fifth Street — West — Two-hundred-and-eighty-five-and-a-half."

"Good gracious! An' we're only three blocks off there now!"

"But you said," expostulated Claire helplessly, feeling herself propelled as by the hand of fate through the crowd toward the door. "You said you live on One-hundred-and-sixteenth Street."

"So I do, my dear, so I do! But I've got some business to transack with a lady livin' in Ninety-fifth Street—West—Two-hunderd-an'-eighty-five-an'-a-half. Come along. 'Step lively,' as my friend, *this nice young man out here on the rear platform,* says."

CHAPTER II

THEY plodded along the flooded street in silence, Claire following after Martha Slawson like a small child, almost clutching at her skirts. It was not easy to keep pace with the long, even strides that covered so much ground, and Claire fell into a steady pony-trot that made her breath come short and quick, her heart beat fast. She dimly wondered what was going to happen, but she did not dare, or care, to ask. It was comfort enough just to feel this great embodiment of human sympathy and strength beside her, to know she was no longer alone.

Before the house Martha paused a moment.

"Now, my dear, there ain't goin' to be nothin' for you to do but just sit tight," she vouchsafed reassuringly. "Don't you start to butt in (if you'll pardon the liberty), no matter what I say. I'm goin' to be a perfect lady, never fear. I know my place, an' I know my dooty, an' if your boardin'-house lady knows hers, there'll be no trouble whatsomedever, so dontcher worry."

She descended the three steps leading from the street-level down into the little paved courtyard below, and rang the basement bell. A moment

and an inner door was unlocked, flung open, and a voice from just within the grating of the closed iron area-gate asked curtly, "Well, what's wanted?"

"Is this Mrs.——? I should say, is this the lady of the house?" Martha Slawson's voice was deep, bland, prepossessing.

"I'm Mrs. Daggett, yes, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean. My name's Slawson. Mrs. Sammy Slawson, an' I come to see you on a little matter of business connected with a young lady who's been lodgin' in your house—Miss Lang."

Mrs. Daggett stepped forward, and unlatched the iron gate. "Come in," she said, in a changed voice, endeavoring to infuse into her acrid manner the grace of a belated hospitality.

Claire, completely hidden from view behind Martha Slawson's heroic proportions, followed in her wake like a wee, foreshortened shadow as, at Mrs. Daggett's invitation, Mrs. Slawson passed through the area gateway into the malodorous basement hall, and so to the dingy dining-room beyond. Here a group of grimy-clothed tables seemed to have alighted in sudden confusion, reminding one of a flock of pigeons huddled together in fear of the vultures soon to descend on them with greedy, all-devouring appetites.

"We can just as well talk here as anywhere," announced Mrs. Daggett. "It's quarter of an hour before dinnertime, but if you'd rather go up to the parlor we can."

"O, dear, no!" said Martha Slawson suavely. "*Any* place is good enough for me. Don't trouble yourself. I'm not particular *where* I am." Unbidden, she drew out a chair from its place beside one of the uninviting tables, and sat down on it deliberately. It creaked beneath her weight.

"O—oh! Miss Lang!" said Mrs. Daggett, surprised, seeing her young lodger now, for the first time.

Martha nodded. "Yes, it's Miss Lang, an' I brought her with me, through the turrbl storm, Mrs.—a——?"

"Daggett," supplied the owner of the name promptly.

"That's right, Daggett," repeated Martha. "I brought Miss Lang with me, Mrs. Daggett, because I couldn't believe my ears when she told me she was goin' to be—to be *turned out,* if she didn't pay up to-night, *weather* or no. I wanted to hear the real truth of it from you, ma'am, straight, with her by."

Mrs. Daggett coughed. "Well, business is business. I'm not a capitalist. I'm not keeping a boarding-house for my health, you know. I

can't afford to give credit when I have to pay cash."

"But, of course, you don't mean you'd ackchelly refuse the young lady shelter a night like this, if she come to you, open an' honest, an' said she hadn't the price by her just at present, but she would have it sooner or later, an' then you'd be squared every cent. You wouldn't turn her down if she said that, would you?"

"Say, Mrs. Slawson, or whatever your name is," broke in Mrs. Daggett sharply, "I'm not here to be cross-questioned. When you told me you'd come on business for Miss Lang, I thought 'twas to settle what she owes. If it ain't—I'm a busy woman. I'm needed in the kitchen this minute, to see to the dishing-up. Have the goodness to come to the point. Is Miss Lang going to pay? If she is, well and good. She can keep her room. If she isn't——" The accompanying gesture was eloquent.

Mrs. Slawson's chair gave forth another whine of reproach as she settled down on it with a sort of inflexible determination that defied argument.

"So that's your ultomato?" she inquired calmly. "I understand you to say that if this young lady (who any one with a blind eye can see she's *quality*), I understand you to say, that if she don't pay down every cent she owes you, here an' now, you'll put her out, bag an' baggage?"

"No, not bag and baggage, Mrs. Slawson," interposed the boarding-house keeper with a wry smile, bridling with the sense that she was about to say something she considered rather neat, "I am, as you might say, holding her bag and baggage—as security."

"Now what do you think o' that!" ejaculated Martha Slawson.

"It's quite immaterial to me what anybody thinks of it," Mrs. Daggett snapped. "And now, if that's all you've got to suggest, why, I'm sure it's all I have, and so, the sooner we end this, the sooner I'll be at liberty to attend to my dinner."

Still Mrs. Slawson did not stir.

"I suppose you think you're a lady," she observed without the faintest suggestion of heat. "I suppose you think you're a lady, but you certainly ain't workin' at it now. What takes my time, though, is the way you ackchelly seem to be meanin' what you say! Why, I wouldn't turn a dog out a night like this, an' you'd let a delicate young girl go into the drivin' storm, a stranger, without a place to lay her head—that is, for all *you* know. I could bet my life, without knowin' a thing about it, that the good Lord never let you have a daughter of your own. He wouldn't trust the keepin' of a child's body, not to speak of her soul, to such as you. That is,

He wouldn't if He could help Himself. But, thanks be! Miss Lang ain't dependent. She's well an' able to pay all she owes. Supposin' she *has* been kinder strapped for a little while back, an' had to economize by comin' to such a place as this! I've knowed others, compelled to economize with three trunks alongside a hall-bedroom wall, for a while, too, an' by an' by their circumstances was such that they had money to burn. It's not for the likes of Miss Lang to try to transack business with your sort. It would soil her lips to bandy words, so I, an old fam'ly servant, an' proud of it! am settlin' up her affairs for her. Be kind enough to say how much it is you are ready to sell your claim to Christian charity for? How much is it you ain't willin' to lend to the Lord on Miss Lang's account?" She plucked up her skirts, thrust her hand, unembarrassed, into her stocking-leg, and brought forth from that safe depository a roll of well-worn *greenbacks*.

Mrs. Daggett named the amount of Claire's indebtedness, and Martha Slawson proceeded to count it out in slow, deliberate syllables. She did not, however, surrender the bills at once.

"I'll take a receipt," she quietly observed, and then sat back with an air of perfect imperturbability, while the boarding-house keeper nervously

fussed about, searching for a scrap of paper, hunting for a pen, trying to unearth, from the most impossible hiding-places, a bottle of ink, her indignation at Martha's *cheek* escaping her in audible mumblings.

"Impudence! What right have you to come here, holding me to account? I've my own way of doing good——"

Mrs. Slawson shrugged. "Your own way? I warrant you have! Nobody else'd reconize it. I'd like to bet, you don't give a penny to charity oncet in five years. Come now, do you?"

"God doesn't take into account the amount one gives," announced Mrs. Daggett authoritatively.

"P'raps not, but you can take it from *me,* He keeps a pretty close watch on what we have left—or I miss my guess. An' now, Miss Claire darlin', if you'll go an' get what belongin's you have, that this generous lady ain't stripped off'n you, to hold for *security,* as she calls it, we'll be goin'. An expressman will be 'round here the first thing in the mornin' for Miss Lang's trunk, an' it's up to you, Mrs. Daggett, to see it's ready for'm when he comes. Good-night to you, ma'am, an' I wish you luck."

Never after could Claire recall in detail what followed. She had a dim vision of glistening pavements on which the rain dashed furiously,

only to rebound with resentful force, saturating one to the skin. Of fierce blasts that seemed to lurk around every corner. Of street-lamps gleaming meaninglessly out of the murk, curiously suggesting blinking eyes set in a vacant face, and at last—at last—in blessed contrast—an open door, the sound of cheery voices, the feel of warmth and welcome, the sight of a plain, wholesome haven—rest.

Martha Slawson checked her children's vociferous clamor with a word. Then her orders fell thick and fast, causing feet to run and hands to fly, causing curiosity to give instant way before the pressure of busy-ness, and a sense of co-operation to make genial the task of each.

"Hush, everybody! Cora, you go make up the bed in the boarder's room. Turn the mattress, mind! An' stretch the sheets good an' smooth, like I learned you to do. Francie, you get the hot-water bottle, quick, so's I can fill it! Sammy, you go down to the cellar, an' tell Mr. Snyder your mother will be much obliged if he'll turn on a' extra spark o' steam-heat. Tell'm, Mrs. Slawson has a lady come to board with her for a spell, that's fixin' for chills or somethin', onless she can be kep' warm an' comfortable, an' the radianator in the boarder's room don't send out much heat to speak of. Talk up polite, Sammy; d'you hear me? An' be sure you don't

let on Snyder might be keepin' a better fire in his furnace if he didn't begrutch the coal so. It's gospel truth, o' course, but landlords is *supposed* to have feelin's, same as the rest of us, an' a gentle word turneth aside wrath. Sabina, now show what a big girl you are, an' fetch mother Cora's nicest nightie out o' the drawer in my beaurer—the nightie Mrs. Granville sent Cora last Christmas. Mother wants to hang it in front of the kitchen-range, so's the pretty lady can go by-bye all warm an' comfy, after she's took her supper off'n the tray, like Sabina did when she had the measles."

Huge Sam Slawson, senior, overtopping his wife by fully half a head, gazed down upon his little hive, from shaggy-browed, benevolent eyes. He uttered no complaint because his dinner was delayed, and he, hungry as a bear, was made to wait till a stranger was served and fed. Instead, he wandered over to where Martha was supplementing "Ma's" ministrations at the range, and patted her approvingly on the shoulder.

"Another stray lamb, mother?" he asked casually.

Martha nodded. "Wait till the rush is over, an' the young uns abed an' asleep, an' I'll tell you all about it. Stray lamb! I should say as much! A little white corset-lamb, used to eat out o' your hand, with a blue ribbon round its neck. Goin' to

be sent out to her death—or worse, by a sharp-fangled wolf of a boardin'-house keeper, who'd gnaw the skin off'n your bones, an' then crack the bones to get at the marrer, if you give her the chanct. I'll tell you all about it later, Sammy."

CHAPTER III

FOR days Claire lay in a state of drowsy quiet.

She hardly realized the fact of her changed condition, that she was being cared for, ministered to, looked after. She had brief, waking moments when she seemed to be aware that Martha was bringing in her breakfast, or sitting beside her while she ate her dinner, but the intervening spaces, when "Ma" or Cora served, were dim, indistinct adumbrations of no more substantial quality than the vagrant dreams that ranged mistily across her relaxed brain.

The thin walls of the cheaply-built flat did not protect her from the noise of the children's prattling tongues and boisterous laughter, but the walls of her consciousness closed her about, as in a muffled security, and she slept on and on, until the exhausted body was reinforced, the overtaxed nerves infused with new strength.

Then, one evening, when the room in which she lay was dusky with twilight shadows, she realized that she was awake, that she was alive. She had gradually groped her way through the dim stretches lying between the region of visions

and that of the actual, but the step into a full sense of reality was abrupt. She heard the sound of children's voices in the next room. So clear they were, she could distinguish every syllable.

"Say, now, listen, mother! What do you do when you go out working every day?" It was Cora speaking.

"I work."

"Pooh, you know what I mean. What kinder work do you do?"

For a moment there was no answer, then Claire recognized Martha's voice, with what was, undeniably, a chuckle tucked away in its mellow depths, where no mere, literal child would be apt to discern it.

"Stenography an' typewritin'!"

"Are you a stenographer an' typewriter, mother? Honest?"

"Well, you can take it from me, if I was *it* at all, I'd be it honest. What makes you think there's any doubt o' my being one? Don't I have the appearance of a high-toned young lady stenographer an' typewriter?"

A pause, in which Martha's substantial steps were to be heard busily passing to and fro, as she went about her work. Her mother's reply evidently did not carry conviction to Cora's questioning mind, for a second later she was up and at it afresh.

"Say, now, listen, mother—if you do stenography an' typewritin', what makes your apron so wet an' dirty, nights when you come home?"

"Don't you s'pose I clean my machine before I leave? What kinder typewriter d'you think I am? To leave my machine dirty, when a good scrubdown, with a pail o' hot water, an' a stiff brush, an' Sapolio, would put it in fine shape for the next mornin'."

"Mother—say, now, listen! I don't *believe* that's the way they clean typewriters. Miss Symonds, she's the Principal's seckerterry to our school, an' she sits in the office, she cleans her machine with oil and a little fine brush, like you clean your teeth with."

"What you been doin' in the Principal's office, miss, I should like to know? Been sent up to her for bad behavior, or not knowin' your lessons? Speak up now! Quick!"

"My teacher, she sends me on errands, an' I got a credit-card last week an', say, mother, I don't *believe* you're a young lady stenographer an' typewriter. You're just trying to fool me."

"Well, Miss Smarty, supposin' I am. So long's I don't succeed you've no kick comin'."

"Say, now listen, mother."

"Hush! You'll wake the pretty lady. Besides, too many questions before dinner is apt to

spoil the appetite, to say nothin' of the temper. Turn to, an' lend a hand with them potatoes. Smash 'em good first, an' then beat 'em with a fork until they're light an' creamy, an' you won't have so much gimp left for snoopin' into things that don't concern you!"

"Say, now listen, mother!"

"Well?"

"Say, mother, something awful funny happened to me last night?"

"Are you tellin' what it was?"

"Something woke me up in the middle of the night, 'n' I got up out of bed, an' the clock struck four, 'n' then I knew it was mornin'. 'N' I heard a noise, 'n' I thought it was robbers, 'n' I went to the door, 'n' it was open, 'n' I went out into the hall, 'n'——"

"Well?"

"An' there was *you,* mother, on the stairs—kneelin'!"

"Guess you had a dream, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't."

"What'd I be kneelin' on the stairs for, at four o'clock in the mornin', I should like to know?"

"It looked like you was brushin' 'em down."

"*Me* brushin' down *Snyder's* stairs! Well, now what do you think o' that?" Her tone of amazement, at the mere possibility, struck Cora, and there was a pause, broken at length by

Martha, in a preternaturally solemn voice. "I s'pose you never tumbled to it I might be *prayin'*."

Cora's eyes grew wide. "Prayin'!" she repeated in an awed whisper. "But, mother, what'd you want to go out in the hall for, to pray on the *stairs,* at four o'clock in the mornin'?"

"Prayin' is a godly ack. Wheresomedever, an' *when*somedever you do it."

"But, mother, I don't *believe* you were prayin'. I heard the knockin' o' your whis'-broom. You was brushin' down the stairs."

"Well, what if I was? Cleanliness is next to godliness, ain't it? Prayin' an' cleanin', it amounts to the same thing in the end—it's just a question of what you clean, outside you or *in*."

"But say, now, listen, mother, you never cleaned down Mr. Snyder's stairs before. An' you been making shirtwaists for Mrs. Snyder, after you get home nights. I saw her with one of 'em on."

"Cora, do you know what happened to a little girl oncet who asked too many questions?"

"No."

"Well, I won't tell you now. It might spoil your appetite for dinner. But you can take it from me, the end she met with would surprise you."

Shortly after, Claire's door quietly opened, and Cora, with a lighted taper in her hand, tiptoed

cautiously in, like a young torch-bearing *avant-courrière,* behind whom Mrs. Slawson, laden with a wonderful tray, advanced processionally.

"Light the changelier, an' then turn it low," Martha whispered. "An' then you, yourself, light out, so's the pretty lady can eat in comfort."

The pretty lady, sitting up among her pillows, awake and alert, almost brought disaster upon the taper, and the tray, by exclaiming brightly, "Good-evening! I'm wide awake for good! You needn't tiptoe or hush any more. O, I feel like new! All rested and well and—*ready* again. And I owe it, every bit, to you! You've been so *good* to me!"

It was hard on Cora to have to obey her mother's injunction to "clear out," just when the pretty lady was beginning to demonstrate her right to the title. But Martha's word in her little household was not to be disputed with impunity, and Cora slipped away reluctantly, carrying with her a dazzling vision of soft, dark hair, starry blue-gray eyes, wonderful changing expressions, and, in and over all, a smile that was like a key to unlock hearts.

"My, but it's good to see you so!" said Mrs. Slawson heartily. "I was glad to have you sleep, for goodness knows you needed it, but if you'd 'a' kep' it up a day or so longer, I'd 'a' called in a doctor—shoor! Just as a kind of nacherl per-

caution, against your settlin' down to a permanent sleepin'-beauty ack, for, you can take it from me, I haven't the business address of any Beast, here in New York City, could be counted on to do the Prince-turn, when needed. There's plenty of beasts, worse luck! but they're on the job, for fair. No magic, lightenin'-change about *them*. They stay beasts straight through the performance."

Claire laughed.

"But, as it happened, I didn't need a Prince, did I? I didn't need a Prince or any one else, for I had a good fairy godmother who—— O, Mrs. Slawson, I—I—can't——"

"You don't have to. An' I'm not Mrs. Slawson to you. I'm just Martha, for I feel like you was my own young lady, an' if you call me Mrs. Slawson, I won't feel so, an' here—now—see if you can clear up this tray so clean it'll seem silly to wash the dishes."

For a moment there was silence in the little room, while Claire tried to compose herself, and Martha pretended to be busy with the tray. Then Claire said, "I'll be very glad to call you Martha if you'll let me, and there's something I'd like to say right off, because I've been lying here quite a while thinking about it, and it's very important, indeed. It's about my future, and——"

"You'll excuse my interruckting, but before you

reely get your steam up, let me have a word on my own account, an' then, if you want to, you can fire away—the gun's your own. What I mean *is*—I don't believe in lyin' awake, thinkin' about the future, when a body can put in good licks o' sleep, restin' from the past. It's against my principles. I'm by the day. I work by the day, an' I live by the day. I reasoned it out so-fashion: the past is over an' done with, whatever it may be, an' you can't change it, for all you can do, so what's the use? You can bet on one thing, shoor, whatever ain't dead waste in your past is, somehow, goin' to get dished up to you in your present, or your future. You ain't goin' to get rid of it, till you've worked it into your system *for health,* as our dear old friend, Lydia Pinkham, says. As to the future, the future's like a flea—when you can put your finger on the future, it's time enough to think what you'll do with it. Folkes futures 'd be all right, if they'd just pin down a little tighter to *to-day,* an' make that square up, the best they can, with what they'd oughter do. Now, as to *your* future, there's nothin' to fret about for a minute in it. Jus' now, you're here, safe an' sound, an' here you're goin' to stay until you're well an' strong an' fed up, an' the chill o' Mrs. Daggett is out o' your body an' soul. You can take it from me, that woman is worse than any line-storm *I* ever struck for dampenin'-down purposes, an'

freeze-out, an' generl cussedness. Your business to-day—now—is to get well an' strong. Then the future'll take care of itself."

"But meanwhile," Claire persisted, "I'm living on you. Eating food for which I haven't the money to pay, having loving care for which I couldn't pay, if I had all the money in the world. I guess I know how you settled my account with Mrs. Daggett. You gave her money you had been saving for the rent, and now you are working, slaving overtime, at four o'clock mornings, sweeping down the stairs, and late nights, making shirtwaists for Mrs. Snyder, to help supply what's lacking."

"Just you wait till I see that Cora," observed Mrs. Slawson irrelevantly. "That's the time *her* past will have slopped over on her present, so's she can't tell which is which. Just you wait till I see that Cora!"

"No, no—*please!* Martha *dear!* It wasn't Cora! She's not to blame. I'd have known sooner or later anyway. I always reason things out for myself. Please promise not to scold Cora."

"Scold Cora? Not on your life, my dear; I won't scold Cora. I'm old-fashioned in my ways with childern. I don't believe in scoldin'. It spoils their tempers, but a good *lickin'* oncet in a while, helps 'em to remember, besides bein' good for the circulation."

Claire was ready to cry. "It's all my fault," she lamented. "I was clumsy. I was tactless. And now Cora will be punished for it, and—I make nothing but trouble for you all."

"There, there! For mercy sake, don't take on like that. I promise I'll let Cora go free, if you'll sit back quiet an' eat your dinner in peace. So now! That's better!"

"What I was going to say, Martha dear, is, I'm quite well and strong now, and I want to set about immediately looking for something to do. I ought to be able to support myself, you know, for I'm able-bodied, and not so stupid but that I managed to graduate from college. Once, two summers ago, I tutored—I taught a young girl who was studying to take the Wellesley entrance exams. And I coached her so well she went through without a condition, and she wasn't very quick, either. I wonder if I couldn't teach?"

"Shoor, you could!"

"If I could get a position to teach in some school or some family, I could, maybe, live here with you—rent this room—unless you have some other use for it."

"Lord, no! I *call* it the boarder's room because this flat is really too rich for my blood, but you see I don't want the childern brought up in a bad neighborhood with low companions. Well, Sammy argued the rent was too high, till I told'm

we'd let a room an' make it up that way, but what with this, an' what with that, we ain't had any boarders exceptin' now an' then some friend of himself out of a job, or one o' the girls, livin' out in the houses where I work, gettin' bounced sudden, an' in want of a bed, an' none of 'em ever paid us a cent or was asked for it."

"Well, if I could get a position as teacher or governess, I'd soon be able to pay back what you've laid out for me, and more besides, and—— In the houses where you work, are there any children who need a governess? Any young girls who need a tutor? That's what I wanted to ask you, Martha."

Mrs. Slawson deliberated in silence for a moment.

"There's the Livingstons," she mused, "but they ain't any childern. Only a childish brother-in-law. He's not quite *all there,* as you might say. It'd be no use tryin' to learn him nothin', seein' he's so odd—seventy-odd—an' his habits like to be fixed. Then, there's the Farrands. But the girls goes to Miss Spenny's school, an' the son's at Columbia. It might upset their plans, if I was to suggest their givin' up where they're at, an' havin' you. Then there's the Grays, an' the Granvilles, an' the Thornes. Addin' 'em all together for childern, they'd come to about half a child a pair. Talk about your race suicide! They

say they 'can't afford to have childern.' You can take it from me, it's the poor people are rich nowadays. *We* can afford to have childern, all right, all right. Then there's Mrs. Sherman—— She's got one boy, but he—Radcliffe Sherman—well, he's a limb! A reg'lar young villain. You couldn't manage *him*. Only Lord Ronald can manage Radcliffe Sherman, an' he——"

"Lord Ronald?" questioned Claire, when Mrs. Slawson's meditation threatened to become static.

"Why, he's Mrs. Sherman's brother, Mr. Frank Ronald, an' no real lord could be handsomer-lookin', or grander-behavin', or richer than him. Mrs. Sherman is a widder, or a divorcy, or somethin' stylish like that. Anyhow, I worked for her this eight years an' more—almost ever since Radcliffe was born, an' I ain't seen hide nor hair o' any Mr. Sherman yet, an' they never speak o' him, so I guess he was either too good or too bad to mention. Mr. Frank an' his mother lives with Mrs. Sherman, an' what Mr. Frank says *goes*. His word is law. She thinks the world of'm, an' well she may, for he's a thorerbred. The way he treats me, for instants. You'd think I was the grandest lady in the land. He never sees me but it's, 'How d'do, Martha?' or, 'How's the childern an' Mr. Slawson these days?' He certainly has got grand ways with'm, Mr. Frank has. An' yet, he's never free. You wouldn't

dare make bold with'm. His eyes has a sort o' *keep-off-the-grass* look gener'ly, but when he smiles down at you, friendly-like, why, you wouldn't call the queen your cousin. Radcliffe knows he can't monkey with his uncle Frank, an' when he's by, butter wouldn't melt in that young un's mouth. But other times—my! You see, Mrs. Sherman is dead easy. She told me oncet, childern ought to be brought up 'scientifically.' Lord! She said they'd ought to be let *express their souls,* whatever she means by that. I told her I thought it was safer not to trust too much to the childern's souls, but to help along some occasional with your own—the sole of your slipper. It was then she said she 'abserlootly forbid' any one to touch Radcliffe. She wanted him 'guided by love alone.' Well, that's what he's been guided with, an', you can take it from me, love's made a hash of it, as it ushally does when it ain't mixed with a little common sense. You'd oughta see that fella's anticks when his mother, an' Lord Ronald, ain't by. He'd raise the hair offn your head, if you hadn't a spear of it there to begin with. He speaks to the help as if they was dirt under his feet, an' he'd as lief lie as look at you, an' always up to some new devilment. It'd take your time to think fast enough to keep up with'm. But he ain't all bad—I don't believe no child *is,* not on your life, an' my idea is, he'd

turn out O. K. if only he'd the right sort o' handlin'. Mr. Frank could do it—but when Lord Ronald is by, Radcliffe is a pet lamb—a little woolly wonder. You ast me why I call Mr. Frank Lord Ronald. I never thought of it till one time when Cora said a piece at a Sund'-School ent'tainment. I can't tell you what the piece was, for, to be perfectly honest, I was too took up, at the time, watchin' Cora's stockin', which was comin' down, right before the whole churchful. It reely didn't, but I seen the garter hangin', an' I thought it would, any minute. I remember it was somethin' about a fella called Lord Ronald, who was a reel thorerbred, just like Mr. Frank is. I recklect one of the verses went:

"'Lord Ronald had the lily-white dough——'

(to my way o' thinkin' it's no matter about the color, white or gold or just plain, green paper-money, so long's you've *got* it), anyhow, that's what it said in the piece—

"'Lord Ronald had the lily-white dough,
Which he gave to his cousin, Lady Clare.'

Say, wasn't he generous?—'give to his cousin—Lady Clare'—an'—good gracious! O, excuse me! I didn't mean to jolt your tray like that, but I just couldn't help flyin' up, for I got an idea! True as you live, I got an idea!"

CHAPTER IV

IT did not take long, once Claire was fairly on her feet again, to adjust herself to her new surroundings, to find her place and part in the social economy of the little family-group where she was never for a moment made to feel an alien. She appropriated a share in the work of the household at once, insisting, to Martha's dismay, upon lending a hand mornings with the older children, who were to be got off to school, and with the three-year-old Sabina, who was to stay at home. She assisted with the breakfast preparations, and then, when the busy swarm had flown for the day, she "turned to," to Ma's delight, and got the place "rid up" so it was "clean as a whistle an' neat as a pin."

Ma was not what Martha approvingly called "a hustler."

"Ma ain't thorer," her daughter-in-law confided to Claire, without reproach. "She means well, but, as she says, her mind ain't fixed on things below, an' when that's the case, the dirt is bound to settle. Ma thinks you can run a fam'ly, readin' the Bible an' singin' hymns. Well, p'raps you can, only I ain't never dared try. When I

married Sammy he looked dretful peaky, the fack bein' he hadn't never been properly fed, an' it's took me all of the goin'-on fifteen years now, we been livin' together, to get'm filled up accordin' to his appetite, which is heavy. You see, Ma never had any time to attend to such earthly matters as cookin' a square meal—but she's settin' out to have a lot of leisure with the Lord."

As for Ma, she found it pleasant to watch, from a comfortable distance, the work progressing satisfactorily, without any draft on her own energies.

"Martha's a good woman, miss," she observed judicially, in her detached manner, "but she is like the lady of her name we read about in the blessed Book. When *I* set out in life, I chose the betther part, an' now I'm old, I have the faith to believe I'll have a front seat in heaven. I've knew throuble in me day. I raised ten childern, an' I had three felons, an' God knows I think I earned a front seat in heaven."

Claire's pause, before she spoke, seemed to Ma to indicate she was giving the subject the weighty consideration it deserved.

"According to that, it would certainly seem so. You have rheumatism, too, haven't you?" as if that might be regarded as an added guarantee of special celestial reservation.

Ma paled visibly. "No, miss. I don't never have the rheumatiz now—not so you'd notice it," she said plaintively. "Oncet I'd it thurrbl, an' me son Sammy had it, too, loikewoise, fierce. I'd uster lay in bed moanin' an' cryin' till you'd be surprised, an' me son Sammy, he was a'most as bad. Well, for a week or two, Martha, she done for us the best she cud, I s'pose, but she didn't make for to stop the pain, an' at last one night, when me son Sammy was gruntin', an' I was groanin' to beat the band, Martha, she up, all of a suddint, an' says she, she was goin' for to cure us of the rheumatiz, or know the reason why. An' she went, an' got the karrysene-can, an' she poured out two thurrbl big doses, an' she stood over me son Sammy an' I, till we swalleyed it down, an' since ever we tuk it, me an' Sammy ain't never had a retur-rn. Sometimes I have a sharp twinge o' somethin' in me leg or me arrm, but it ain't rheumatiz, an' I wouldn't like for me son Sammy's wife to be knowin' it, for the very sight of her startin' for the karrysene—if it's only to fill the lamp, is enough to make me gullup, an' I know it's the same wit' me son Sammy, though we never mention the subjeck between us."

"But if your son didn't want to take the stuff," Claire said, trying to hide her amusement, "why didn't he stand up and say so? He's a man. He's much bigger and stronger than his wife.

How could she make him do what he didn't want to?"

The question was evidently not a new one to Ma.

"That's what annywan'd naturrly think," she returned promptly. "But that's because they wouldn't be knowin' me son Sammy's wife. It ain't size, an' it ain't stren'th—it's just, well, *Martha.* There's that about her you wouldn't like to take any chances wit'. Perhaps it's the thing manny does be talkin' of these days. Perhaps it's *that* got a holt of her. Annyhow, she says she's *in* for't. They does be callin' it Woman Sufferrich, I'm told. In my day a dacint body'd have thought shame to be discoursin' in public to the men. They held their tongues, an' let their betthers do the colloguein', but Martha says some of the ladies she works for says, if they talk about it enough the men will give them their rights, an' let 'em vote. I'm an old woman, an' I never had much book-learnin', but I'm thinkin' one like me son Sammy's wife has all the rights she needs wit'out the votin'. She goes out worrkin', same's me son Sammy, day in, day out. She says Sammy could support *her* good enough, but she won't raise her childern in a teniment, along wit' th' low companions. Me son Sammy, he has it harrd these days. He'd not be able to pay for such a grrand flat as this, in a dacint,

quiet neighborhood, an' so Martha turrns to, an' lends a hand. An' wance, when me son Sammy was sick, an' out av a job entirely, Martha, she run the whole concern herself. She wouldn't let me son Sammy give up, or get down-hearted, like he mighta done. She said it was her *right* to care for us all, an' him, too, bein' he was down an' out, like he was. It seems to me that's fairrly all the rights anny woman'd want—to look out for four childern, an' a man, an' a mother-in-law. But if Martha wants to vote, too, why, I'm thinkin' she will."

It was particularly encouraging to Claire, just at this time, to view Martha in the light of one who did not know the meaning of the word fail, for Mrs. Slawson had assured her that if she would give up all attempt to find employment on her own account, she, Mrs. Slawson, felt she could safely promise to get her "a job that would be satisfacktry all round, only one must be a little pationate."

But a week, ten days, had gone by, since Martha announced she had *an idea,* and still the idea had not materialized. Meanwhile, Claire had ample time to unpack her trunk and settle her belongings about her, so "the pretty lady's room" took on a look of real comfort, and the children never passed the door without pausing before the threshold, waiting with bated breath for some

wonderful chance that would give them a "peek" into the enchanted chamber. As a matter of fact, the transformation was effected with singularly few "properties." Some good photographs tastefully framed in plain, dark wood. A Baghdad rug left over from her college days, some scraps of charming old textiles, and such few of the precious home trifles as could be safely packed in her trunk. There was a daguerreotype of her mother, done when she was a girl. "As old-fashioned as your grandmother's hoopskirt," Martha called it. A sampler wrought by some ancient great-aunt, both aunt and sampler long since yellowed and mellowed by the years. A della Robbia plaque, with its exquisite swaddled baby holding out eager arms, as if to be taken. A lacquer casket, a string of Egyptian mummy-beads—what seemed to the children an inexhaustible stock of wonderful, mysterious treasures.

But the object that appeared to interest their mother more than anything else in the whole collection, was a book of unmounted photographs, snap-shots taken by Claire at college, during her travels abroad, some few, even, here in the city during those first days when she had dreamed it was easy to walk straight into an art-editorship, and no questions asked.

Mrs. Slawson scrutinized the prints with an

earnestness so eager that Claire was fairly touched, until she discovered that here was no aching hunger for knowledge, no ungratified yearning " for to admire and for to see, for to be'old this world so wide," but just what looked like a perfectly feminine curiosity, and nothing more.

" Say, ain't it a pity you ain't any real good likeness of you? " Martha deplored. " These is so aggeravatin'. They don't show you up at all. Just a taste-like, an' then nothin' to squench the appetite."

" That sounds as if I were an entrée or something," laughed Claire. " But, you see, I don't want to be *shown up,* Martha. I couldn't abear it, as my friend, Sairy Gamp, would say. When I was little, my naughty big brother used to tease me dreadfully about my looks. He invented the most embarrassing nicknames for me; he alluded to my features with every sort of disrespect. It made me horribly conscious of myself, a thing no properly-constituted kiddie ought ever to be, of course. And I've never really got over the feeling that I am a 'sawed-off,' that my nose is 'curly,' and my hair's a wig, and that the least said about the rest of me, the better. But if you'd actually like to see something my people at home consider rather good, why, here's a little tinted photograph I had done for my dear Daddy, the

last Christmas he was with us. He liked it, and that's the reason I carry it about with me—because he wore it on his old-fashioned watch-chain."

She put into Martha's hand a thin, flat, dull-gold locket.

Mrs. Slawson opened it, and gave a quick gasp of delight—the sound of triumph escaping one who, having diligently sought, has satisfactorily found. "Like it!" Martha ejaculated.

Claire deliberated a moment, watching the play of expression on Martha's mobile face. "If you like it as much as all that," she said at last, "I wish you'd take it and keep it. It seems conceited—priggish—to suppose you'd care to own it, but if you really *would* care to——"

Mrs. Slawson closed one great, finely-formed, work-hardened fist over the delicate treasure, with a sort of ecstatic grab of appropriation. "Care to own it! You betcher life! There's nothin' you could give me I'd care to own better," she said with honest feeling, then and there tying its slender ribbon about her neck, and slipping the locket inside her dress, as if it had been a precious amulet.

The day following saw her started bright and early for work at the Shermans'. When she arrived at the area-gate and rang, there was no response, and though she waited a reasonable

time, and then rang and rang again, nobody answered the bell.

"They must be up," she said, settling down to business with a steady thumb on the electric button. "What ails the bunch o' them in the kitchen, I should like to know. It'd be a pity to disturb Eliza. She might be busy, gettin' herself an extry cup o' coffee, an' couple o' fried hams-an'-eggs, to break her fast before breakfast. But that gay young sprig of a kitchenmaid, *she* might answer the bell an' open the door to an honest woman."

The *gay young sprig* still failing of her duty, and Martha's patience giving out at last, the *honest woman* began to tamper with the spring-lock of the iron gate. For any one else, it would never have yielded, but it opened to Martha's hand, as with the dull submission of the conquered.

Mrs. Slawson closed the gate after her with care. "I'll just step light," she said to herself, "an' steal in on 'em unbeknownst, an' give 'em as good a scare as ever they had in their lives—the whole lazy lot of 'em."

But, like Mother Hubbard's cupboard, the kitchen was bare, and no soul was to be found in the laundry, the pantry or, in fact, anywhere throughout the basement region. Softly, and with some real misgiving now, Martha made her

way upstairs. Here, for the first time, she distinguished the sound of a human voice breaking the early morning hush of the silent house. It was Radcliffe's voice issuing, evidently, from the dining-room, in which imposing apartment he chose to have his breakfast served in solitary grandeur every morning, what time the rest of his family still slept.

Martha, pausing on her way up, peeped around the edge of the half-closed door, and then stopped short.

Along the wall, ranged up in line, like soldiers facing their captain, or victims of a hold-up their captor, stood the household servants—portly Shaw the butler, Beatrice the parlor-maid, Eliza the "chef-cook"—all, down to the gay young sprig, aforesaid, who, as Martha had explained to her family in strong disapproval, "was engaged to do scullerywork, an' then didn't even know how to scull." Before them, in an attitude of command, not to say menace, stood Radcliffe, brandishing a carving-knife which, in his cruelly mischievous little hand, became a weapon full of dangerous possibilities.

"Don't dare to budge, any one of you," he breathed masterfully to his cowed regiment. "Get back there, you Shaw! An', Beetrice, if you don't mind me, I'll carve your ear off. You better be afraid of me, all of you, an' mind what

I say, or I'll take this dagger, an' dag the life out of you! You're all my servants—you're all my slaves! D'you hear me!"

Evidently they did, and not one of them cared or dared to stir.

For a second Radcliffe faced them in silence, before beginning to march Napoleonically back and forth, his savage young eye alert, his naughty hand brandishing the knife threateningly. A second, and then, suddenly, without warning, the scene changed, and Radcliffe was a squirming, wriggling little boy, shorn of his power, grasped firmly in a grip from which there was no chance of escape.

"Shame on you!" exclaimed Martha indignantly, addressing the spellbound line, staring at her blankly. "Shame on you! To stand there gawkin', an' never raisin' a finger to this poor little fella, an' him just perishin' for the touch of a real mother's hand. Get out of this—the whole crowd o' you," and before the force of her righteous wrath they fled as chaff before the wind. Then, quick as the automatic click of a monstrous spring, the hitherto unknown—the supposed-to-be-impossible—befell Radcliffe Sherman. He was treated as if he had been an iron girder on which the massive clutch of a steam-lift had fastened. He was raised, lowered, laid across what seemed to be two moveless iron trestles,

and then the weight as of a mighty, relentless paddle, beat down upon him once, twice, thrice—and he knew what it was to suffer.

The whole thing was so utterly novel, so absolutely unexpected, that for the first instant he was positively stunned with surprise. Then the knowledge that he was being spanked, that an unspeakable indignity was happening him, made him clinch his teeth against the sobs that rose in his throat, and he bore his punishment in white-faced, shivering silence.

When it was over, Martha stood him down in front of her, holding him firmly against her knees, and looked him squarely in the eyes. His colorless, quivering lips gave out no sound.

"You've got off easy," observed Mrs. Slawson benevolently. "If you'd been my boy Sammy, you'd a got about twict as much an' three times as thora. As it is, I just kinder favored you—give you a lick an' a promise, as you might say, seein' it's you and you ain't used to it—*yet*. Besides, I reely like you, an' want you to be a good boy. But, if you should need any more at any other time, why, you can take it from me, I keep my hand in on Sammy, an' practice makes perfect."

She released the two small, trembling hands, rose to her feet, and made as if to leave the room. Then for the first time Radcliffe spoke.

"S-say," he breathed with difficulty, "s-say —are you—are you goin' to *t-tell?*"

Martha paused, regarding him and his question with due concern. "Tell?"

"Are y-you going to—t-tell on me, t-to ev-everybody? Are y-you going to t-tell—S-Sammy?"

"Shoor I'm not! I'm a perfect lady! I always keep such little affairs with my gen'lemen friends strickly confidential. Besides—Sammy has troubles of his own."

CHAPTER V

ALL that day, Martha held herself in readiness to answer at headquarters for what she had done.

"He'll shoor tell his mother, the young villyan," said Eliza. "An' then it'll be Mrs. Slawson for the grand bounce."

But Mrs. Slawson did not worry. She went about her work as usual, and when, in the course of her travels, she met Radcliffe, she greeted him as if nothing had happened.

"Say, did you know that Sammy has a dog?"

No answer.

"It's a funny kind o' dog. If you begged your head off, I'd never tell you where he come from."

"Where did he come from?"

"Didn't you hear me say I'd never tell you? I do' know. He just picked Sammy's father up on the street, an' follered him home, for all the world the same's he'd been a Christian."

"What kind of dog is he?"

"Cur-dog."

"What kind's that?"

"Well, a full-blooded cur-dog is somethin' rare in these parts. You wouldn't find him at an

ordinary dog-show, like your mother goes to. Now, Sammy's dog is full-blooded—leastways, he will be, when he's fed up."

"My mother's dog is a *pedigree-dog.* Is Sammy's that kind?"

"I ain't ast him, but I shouldn't wonder."

"My mother's got a paper tells all about where Fifi came from. It's in a frame."

"Fifi is?"

"No, the paper is. The paper says Fifi is out of a deller, sired by Star. I heard her read it off to a lady that came to see her one day. Say, Martha, what's a *deller?*"

"I do' know."

"Fifi has awful long ears. What kind of ears has Sammy's dog got?"

"I didn't notice partic'lar, I must say. But he's got two of 'em, an' they can stand up, an' lay down, real natural-like, accordin' to taste—the dog's taste, which wouldn't be noways remarkable, if it was his tongue, but is what *I* call extraordinary, seein' it's his *ears.* An' his tail's the same, exceptin' it has even more education still. It can wag, besides standin' up an' layin' down. Ain't that pretty smart for a pup, that prob'ly didn't have no raisin' to speak of, 'less you count raisin' on the toe of somebody's boot?"

"D'you mean anybody kicked him?"

"Well, he ain't said so, in so many words, but

I draw my own conclusions. He's an honorable, gentlemanlike dog. He keeps his own counsel. If it so happened that he'd needed to be punished at any time, he'd bear it like a little man, an' hold his tongue. You don't catch a reel thorerbred whinin'."

"I wish I could see Sammy's dog."

"Well, p'raps you can. But I'll tell you confidential, I wouldn't like Flicker to 'sociate with none but the best class o' boys. I'm goin' to see he has a fine line of friends from this time on, an' if Sammy ain't what he'd oughter be, why, he just can't mix with Flicker, that's all there is *to* it!"

"Who gave him that name?"

"'His sponsers in baptism——' Ho! Hear me! Recitin' the Catechism! I'm such a good 'Piscopalian I just can't help it! A little lady-friend of mine gave him that name, 'cause he flickers round so—so like a little yeller flame. Did I mention his color was yeller? That alone would show he's a true-breed cur-dog."

"Say, I forgot—my mother she—she sent me down to tell you she wants to see you right away up in her sittin'-room. I guess you better go quick."

Mrs. Slawson ceased plying her polishing-cloth upon the hardwood floor, sat back upon her heels, and calmly gathered her utensils together.

"Say, my mother she said tell you she wanted to see you right off, for something particular. Ain't you goin' to hurry?"

"Shoor I am. Certaintly."

"You don't look as if you was hurrying."

"When you get to be a big boy, and have a teacher to learn you knowledge, you'll find that large bodies moves slowly. I didn't have as much schoolin' as I'd like, but what I learned I remember, an' I put it into practice. That's where the use of books comes in—to be put in practice. Now, I'm a large body, an' if I tried to move fast I'd be goin' against what's printed in the books, which would be wrong. Still, if a lady sends for me post-haste, why, of course, I makes an exception an' answers in the same spirit. So long! See you later!"

Radcliffe had no mind to remain behind. Something subtly fascinating in Martha seemed to draw him after her, and he followed on upstairs, swinging himself athletically along, hand over hand, upon the baluster-rail, almost at her heels.

"Say, don't you wonder what it is my mother's goin' to say to you?" he demanded disingenuously.

Mrs. Slawson shook her head. "Wonderin' is a habit I broke myself off of, when I wasn't knee-high to a grasshopper," she replied. "I take things as they come, not to mention as they

go. Either way suits me, an' annyhow I don't wonder about 'em. If it's somethin' good, why, it'll keep. An' if it's somethin' bad, wonderin' won't make it any better. So what's the use?"

"Guess I'll go on up, an' see my grandmother in her room," observed Radcliffe casually, as they reached Mrs. Sherman's door. "I won't go in here with you."

"Dear me, how sorry I am!" Martha returned with feeling. "I'd kinder counted on you for—for what they calls moral support, that bein' the kind the male gender is mainly good for, these days. But, of course, if you ain't been invited, it wouldn't be genteel for you to press yourself. I can understand your feelin's. They does credit to your head an' to your heart. As I said before—so long! See you later."

The door having closed her in, Radcliffe lingered aimlessly about, outside. Without, of course, being able to analyze it, he felt as if some rare source of entertainment had been withdrawn from him, leaving life flat and tasteless. He felt like being, what his mother called, "fractious," but—he remembered, as in a flash, "you never catch a thorerbred whinin'," and he snapped his jaws together with manly determination.

At Martha's entrance, Mrs. Sherman glanced up languidly from the book she was reading, and

inquired with pointed irony, "You didn't find it convenient to come to me directly I sent for you, did you, Martha?"

Mrs. Slawson closed the door behind her gently, then stood planted like some massive caryatid supporting the frame. Something monumental in the effect of her presence made the question just flung at her seem petty, impudent, and Mrs. Sherman hastened to add more considerately, "But I sent Radcliffe with my message. No doubt he delayed."

"No'm," admitted Martha, "he told me all right enough, but I was in the middle o' polishin'. It took me a minute or two to get my things collected, an' then it took me a couple more to get *me* collected, but—better late than never, as the sayin' goes, which, by the same token, I don't believe it's always true."

There was not the faintest trace of apology or extenuation in her tone or manner. If she had any misgivings as to the possibility of Radcliffe's having complained, she gave no evidence of it.

"What I want to say is this," announced Mrs. Sherman autocratically, making straight for the point. "I absolutely forbid any one in my household to touch——"

Martha settled herself more firmly on her feet and crossed her arms with unconscious dignity

upon her bosom, bracing herself against the coming blow.

"I absolutely forbid any one in my household to touch the new marble slabs and nickel fittings in my dressing-rooms with cleaning stuffs containing acids, after this. I have gone to great expense to have the house remodeled this summer, and the bathrooms have all been tiled and fitted up afresh, from beginning to end. I know that, in the past, you have used acid, gritty soaps on the basins and tubs, Martha, and my plumber tells me you mustn't do it. He says it's ruinous. He recommends kerosene oil for the bath-tubs and marble slabs. He says it will take any stain out, and is much safer than the soaps. So please use kerosene to remove the stains——"

Mrs. Slawson relaxed. Without the slightest hint of incivility she interrupted cheerfully, "An' does your plumber mention what'll remove the stink—I *should* say, *odor,* of the karrysene?"

Mrs. Sherman laughed. "Dear me, no. I'm afraid that's *up to* you, as Radcliffe says."

"O, I ain't no doubt it can be done, an' even if it can't, the smell o' karrysene is healthy, an' you wouldn't mind a faint whifft of it now an' then, clingin' to you, comin' outer your bath, would you? Or if you did, you might set over against the oil-smell one o' them strong bath-powders that's like the perfumery-counter in a

department-store broke loose, an' let 'em fight it out between 'em. To my way o' thinkin', it'd be a *tie,* an' no thanks to your nose."

"Well, I only follow the plumber's directions. He guarantees his work and materials, but he says acids will roughen the surface of anything—enamel or marble or whatever it may be. I'm sure you'll be careful in the future, now I have spoken, and—er—how are you getting on these days? How are you and your husband and the children?"

"Tolerable, thank you. Sammy, my husband, he ain't been earnin' as much as usual lately, but I says to him, when he's downhearted-like because he can't hand out the price o' the rent, 'Say, you ain't fished up much of anythin' certaintly, but count your blessin's. You ain't fell in the river either.' An' be this an' be that, we make out to get along. We never died a winter yet."

"Dear me, I should think a great, strapping man ought to be able to support his family without having to depend on his wife to go out by the day."

"My husband does his best," said Martha with simple dignity. "He does his best, but things goes contrairy with some, no doubt o' that."

"O, the thought of the day would not bear you out there, I assure you!" Mrs. Sherman took

her up quickly. "Science teaches us that our condition in life reflects our character. We get the results of what we are in our environment. You understand? In other words, each receives his desert. I hope I am clear? I mean, what he deserves."

Martha smiled, a slow, calm, tolerant smile. "You are perfeckly clear," she said reassuringly. "Only I ain't been educated up to seein' things that way. Seems to me, if everybody got their dessert, as you calls it, some o' them that's feedin' so expensive now at the grand hotels wouldn't have a square meal. It's the ones that ain't *earned* 'em, *havin'* the square meal *and* the dessert, that puts a good man, like my Sammy, out o' a job. But that's neither here nor there. It's all bound to come right some day—only meanwhiles, I wish livin' wasn't so high. What with good steak twenty-eight cents a pound, an' its bein' as much as your life is worth to even ast the price o' fresh vegetables, it takes some contrivin' to get along. Not to speak o' potatas twenty-five cents the half-peck, an' every last one o' my fam'ly as fond of 'em as if they was fresh from Ireland, instead o' skippin' a generation on both sides."

"But, my good woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Sherman, shocked, "what *do* you mean by talking of porterhouse steak and fresh vegetables this

time of year? Oughtn't you to economize? Isn't it extravagant for you to use such expensive cuts of meat? I'm sure there are others that are cheaper—more suited to your—your income."

"Certaintly there is. Chuck steak is cheap. Chuck steak's so cheap that about all it costs you is a few cents to the butcher, an' the price of the store teeth you need, after you've broke your own tryin' to chew it. But, you see, my notion is, to try to give my fam'ly the sort o' stuff that's nourishin'. Not just somethin' to *eat,* but *food.* I don't believe their stummicks realize they belong to poor folks. I'm not envyin' the rich, mind you. Dear no! I wouldn't be hired to clutter up my insides with the messes I see goin' up to the tables of some I work for. Cocktails, an' entrys, an' foody-de-gra-gra, an' suchlike. No! I believe in reel, straight nourishment. The things that builds up your bones, an' gives you red blood, an' good muscle, so's you can hold down your job, an' hold up your head. I believe in payin' for that kind o' food, if I *do* have to work for it."

Mrs. Sherman took up the book she had dropped at Martha's entrance.

"You certainly are a character," she observed.

"Thank you, 'm," said Martha.

"O, and by the way, before you go—I want you to see that Mr. Ronald's rooms are put in per-

fect order to-day. I don't care to trust it to the girls, but you can have one of them to help you, if you like, provided you are sure to oversee her. You know how particular I am about my brother Frank's rooms. Be sure nothing is neglected."

"Yes'm," said Martha.

CHAPTER VI

THE next morning Eliza met her at the area-gate, showing a face of ominous sympathy, wagging a doleful head.

"What'd I tell you?" she exclaimed before she had even unlatched the spring-lock. "That young villyan has a head on him old enough to be his father's, if so be he ever had one. He's deep as a well. He didn't tell his mother on ye yesterday mornin', but he done worse—the little fox! He told his uncle Frank when he got home last night. Leastways, Mr. Shaw got a message late in the evenin' from upstairs, which was, to tell Mrs. Slawson, Mr. Ronald wanted to see her after his breakfast this mornin', an' be sure she didn't forget."

Mrs. Slawson received the news with a smile as of such actual welcome, that Eliza, who flattered herself she knew a thing or two about human nature, was rather upset in her calculations.

"You look like you *relish* bein' bounced," she observed tartly.

"Well, if I'm goin' to get my walkin'-papers, I'd rather get 'em from Mr. Frank than from

anybody else. There's never any great loss without some small gain. At least, if Mr. Frank is dischargin' me, he's noticin' I'm alive, an' that's somethin' to be thankful for."

"That's *as* you look at it!" snapped Eliza. "Mr. Frank is all right enough, but I must say I'd rather keep my place than have even him kick me out. An' you look as if his sendin' for you was to say you'd come in for a fortune."

"P'raps it is," said Martha. "You never can tell."

"Well, if *I* was makin' tracks for fortunes, I wouldn't start in on Mr. Frank Ronald," Eliza observed cuttingly.

"Which might be exackly where you'd slip up on it," Martha returned with a bland smile.

And yet, in reality, she was by no means so composed as she appeared. She felt as might one who, moved by a great purpose, had rashly usurped the prerogative of fate and set in motion mighty forces that, if they did not make for success, might easily make for disaster. She had very definitely stuck her thumb into somebody else's pie, and if her laudable intention was to draw forth a plum, not for herself but for the other, why, that was no proof that, in the end, she might not get smartly scorched for her pains.

When the summons to the dining-room actually

came, Martha felt such an unsubstantiality in the region of her knee-joints, that for a moment she almost believed the bones had turned into bread-crumbs. Then energetically she shook herself into shape, spurning her momentary weakness from her, with an almost visible gesture, and marched forward to meet what awaited her.

Shaw had removed the breakfast dishes from the table beside which "Lord Ronald" sat alone. It was all very imposing, the place, the particular purpose for which she had been summoned, and which was, as yet, unrevealed to her, the *person*, most of all.

Martha thought that perhaps she had been a little hard on Cora, "the time she give her the tongue-lashin' for stumblin' over the first lines of her piece, that evenin' of the Sund'-School ent'tainment. It wasn't so dead easy as a body might think, to stand up to a whole churchful o' people, or even one person, when he was the kind that's as good (or as bad) as a whole churchful."

Martha could see her now, as she stood then, announcing to the assembled multitude in a high, unmodulated treble:

"It was the t-time when l-lilies bub-blow"

"an' her stockin' fixin' to come down any min'-ute!"

"Ah, Martha, good-morning!"

At the first sound of his voice Mrs. Slawson recovered her poise. That *wouldn't-call-the-queen-your-cousin* feeling came over her again, and she was ready to face the music, whatever tune it might play. So susceptible is the foolish spirit of mortal to those subtle, impalpable influences of atmosphere that we try to describe, in terms of inexact science, as personality, vibration, aura, magnetism.

"I asked to see you, Martha, because Radcliffe tells me——"

Martha's heart sank within her. So it was Radcliffe and the *grand bounce* after all, and not—— Well, it was a pity! After all her thinkin' it out, an' connivin', an' contrivin', to have nothin' come of it! To be sent off before she had time to see the thing through!

"Radcliffe tells me," continued the clear, mellow voice, penetrating the mist of her meditations, "that you own a very rare, a very unusual breed of dog. I couldn't make out much from Radcliffe's description, but apparently the dog is a pedigree animal."

Mrs. Slawson's shoulders, in her sudden revulsion of feeling, shook with soundless mirth.

"Pedigree animal!" she repeated. "Certaintly! Shoor, he's a pedigree animal. He's had auntsisters as far back as any other dog, an' that's a fack. What's the way they put it? 'Out

of ' the gutter, ' sired by ' Kicks. You never see a little yeller, mongol, cur-dog, sir, that's yellerer or cur-er than him. I'd bet my life his line ain't never been crossed by anythin' different, since the first pup o' them all set out to run his legs off tryin' to get rid o' the tin-can tied to his tail. But Flicker's a winner, for all that, an' he's goin' to keep my boy Sammy in order, better'n I could ever do it. You see, I just has to hint to Sammy that if he ain't proper-behaved I won't let Flicker 'sociate with'm, an' he's as good as pie. I wouldn't be without that dog, sir, now I got intimately acquainted with him, for——"

"That touches the question I was intending to raise," interposed Mr. Ronald. "You managed to get Radcliffe's imagination considerably stirred about Flicker, and the result is, he has asked me to see if I can't come to an understanding with you. He wants me to buy Flicker."

Martha's genial smile faded. "Why, goodness gracious, Lor—I *should* say, *Mr.* Ronald, the poor little rascal, dog rather, ain't worth two cents. He's just a young flagrant pup, you wouldn't be bothered to notice, 'less you had the particular likin' for such things we got."

"Radcliffe wants Flicker. I'll give you ten dollars for him."

"I—I couldn't take it, Mr. Ronald, sir. It wouldn't be fair to you!"

"Fifteen dollars."

"It ain't the money——"

"Twenty!"

"I—I can't!"

"Twenty-five dollars, Martha. Radcliffe's heart is set on the dog."

A quick observer, looking attentively at Mrs. Slawson's face, could have seen something like a faint quiver disturb the firm lines of her lips and chin for a moment. A flash, and it was gone.

"I'd *give* you the dog, an' welcome, Mr. Ronald," she said presently, "but I just can't do it. The little feller, he never had a square deal before, an' because my husband an' the rest of us give it to him, he loves us to death, an' you'd think he'd bark his head off for joy when the raft o' them gets home after school. An' then, nights —(I ben workin' overtime lately, doin' outside jobs that bring me home late)—nights, when I come back, an' all in the place is abed an' asleep, an' I let myself in, in the black an' the cold, the only livin' creature to welcome me is Flicker. An' there he stands, up an' ready for me, the minute he hears my key in the lock, an' when I open the door, an' light the changelier (he don't dare let a bark out of'm, he knows better, the smart little fella!), there he stands, a-waggin' his stump of a tail like a Christian, an'—Mr. Ronald, sir—that wag ain't for sale!"

For a moment something akin in both held them silent. Then Mr. Ronald slowly inclined his head. "You are quite right, Martha. I understand your feeling."

Martha turned to go. She had, in fact, reached the door when she was recalled.

"O—one moment, please."

She came back.

"My sister tells me you worked in my rooms yesterday. Was any one there with you at the time?"

"No, sir. Mrs. Sherman said I might have one of the girls, but I perfer to see to your things myself."

"Then you were quite alone?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know if any one else in the household had occasion to go into my rooms during the day?"

"Of course I can't be pos'tive. But I don't think so, sir."

"Then I wonder if this belongs to you?" He extended his hand toward her. In his palm lay a small, flat, gold locket.

Something like the faintest possible electric shock passed up Mrs. Slawson's spine, and contracted the muscles about her mouth. For a second she positively grinned, then quickly her face regained its customary calm. With a clever, if

slightly tardy, movement, her hand went up to her throat.

"Yes, sir—shoor, it's mine! Now what do you think of that! Me losin' somethin' I think the world an' all of, an' have wore for, I do' know how long, an' never missin' it!"

Mr. Ronald's eyes shot out a quick, quizzical gleam.

"O, you have been accustomed to wear it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mrs. Sherman tells me she never remembers to have seen you with any sort of ornament, even a gold pin. She thought the locket could not possibly belong to you."

"Well, it does. An' the reason she hasn't noticed me wearin' it is, I wear it under my waist, see?"

Again Mr. Ronald fixed her with his keen eyes. "I see. You wear it under your waist. Of course, that explains why she hasn't noticed it. Yet, *if* you wear it under your waist, how came it to get out from under and be on my desk?"

Martha's face did not change beneath his scrutiny. During a rather long moment she was silent, then her answer came glibly enough.

"When I'm workin' I'm ap' to get het-up, an' then I sometimes undoes the neck o' my waist, an' turns it back to give me breathin'-room."

Mr. Ronald accepted it gravely. "Well, it is

a very pretty locket, Martha—and a very pretty face inside it. Of course, as the trinket was in my room, and as there was no name or sign on the outside to identify it, I opened it. I hope you don't mind."

"Certainly not," Martha assured him. "Certainly not!"

"The inscription on the inside puzzles me. 'Dear Daddy, from Claire.' Now, assuredly, you're not *dear Daddy,* Martha."

Mrs. Slawson laughed. "Not on your life, I ain't *Dear Daddy,* sir. Dear Daddy was Judge Lang of Grand Rapids—you know, where the furnitur' an' the carpet-sweepers comes from—— He died about a year ago, an' Miss Claire, knowin' how much store I set by her, an' how I'd prize her picture, she give me the locket, as you see it."

"You say Grand Rapids?—the young lady, Miss Claire, as you call her, lives in Grand Rapids?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose you think I am very inquisitive, asking so many questions, but the fact is, I am extremely interested. You will see why, when I explain that several weeks ago, one day downtown, I saw a little girl—a young lady—who might have been the original of this very picture, the resemblance is so marked. But, of course, if your

young lady lives in Grand Rapids, she can't be my little girl—I should say, the young woman I saw here in New York City. But if they were one and the same, they couldn't look more alike. The only difference I can see, is that the original of your picture is evidently a prosperous 'little sister of the rich,' and the original of mine—the one I've carried in my mind—is a breadwinner. She was employed in an office where I had occasion to go one day on business. The next time I happened to drop in there—a few days later—she was gone. I was sorry. That office was no place for her, but I would have been glad to find her there, that I might have placed her somewhere else, in a safer, better position. I hope she has come to no harm."

Martha hung fire a moment. Then, suddenly, her chin went up, as with the impulse of a new resolve.

"I'll be open an' aboveboard with you, sir," she said candidly. "The world is certaintly small, an' the way things happen is a caution. Now, who'd ever have thought that you'd 'a' seen my Miss Claire, but I truly believe you have. For after her father died she come to New York, the poor lamb! for to seek her fortune, an' her as innercent an' unsuspectin' as my Sabina, who's only three this minit. She tried her hand at a lot o' things, an' thank God an' her garden-

angel for keepin' her from harm, for as delicate an' pretty as she is, she can't *help* attractin' attention, an' you know what notions some as calls themselves gen'lemen has, in this town. Well, Miss Claire is livin' under my roof, an' you can betcher life I'm on the job—relievin' her garden-angel o' the pertectin' end o' the business. But Miss Claire's that proud an' inderpendent-like she ain't contented to be idle. She's bound to make her own livin', which, she says, it's everybody's dooty to do, some ways or other. So my eye's out, as you might say, for a place where she can teach, like she's qualified to do. Did I tell you, she's a college lady, an' has what she calls a 'degree,' which I didn't know before anythin' but Masons like himself had 'em.

"You oughter see how my boy Sammy gets his lessons, after she's learned 'em to him. She's a wizard at managin' boys. My Sammy useter to be up to all sorts o' mischief. They was a time he took to playin' hookey. He'd march off mornin's with his sisters, bold as brass, an' when lunchtime come, in he'd prance, same as them, an' nobody ever doubtin' he hadn't been to his school. An' all the time, there he was playin' in the open lots with a gang o' poor little neglected dagos. I noticed him comin' in evenin's kinder dissipated-lookin', but I hadn't my wits about me enough to be onto'm, till his teacher sent me a note one

day, by his sister Cora, askin' what was ailin' Sammy. That night somethin' ailed Sammy for fair. He stood up to his dinner, an' he wouldn't 'a' had a cravin' to set down to his breakfast next mornin', only Francie put a pilla in his chair. But Miss Claire, she's got him so bewitched, he'd break his heart before he'd do what she wouldn't like. The thought of her goin' away makes him sick to his stummick, the poor fella! Yet, it ain't to be supposed anybody so smart, an' so good-lookin' as her, but would be snapped up quick by them as has the sense to see the worth of her. There's no question about her gettin' a job, the only worry *I* have is her gettin' one that will take her away from this, out of New York City, where I can't see her oncet in a while. She's the kind you'd miss, like you would a front tooth. You feel you can't get on without her, an' true for you, you can't. But, beggin' your pardon, sir, for keepin' you so long with my talkin'. If that's all, I'll get to my work."

"That is all," said Mr. Ronald, "except——" He rose and handed her the locket.

She took it from him with a smile of perfect good-fellowship, and passed from the room. Once outside the threshold, with the door closed upon her, she drew a long, deep breath of relief.

"Well, I'm glad *that's* over, an' I got out of it with a whole skin," she ruminated. "Lord, but

I thought he had me shoor, when he took me up about how the thing got out o' me dress, with his gimlet eyes never stirrin' from my face, an' me tremblin' like an ashpan. If I hadn't 'a' had my wits about me, I do' know where I'd 'a' come out. But all's well that ends swell, as Miss Claire says, an' bless her heart, it's her as'll end swell, if what I done this day takes root, an' I believe it will."

CHAPTER VII

WHEN Martha let herself into her flat that night, she was welcomed by another beside Flicker.

"You *naughty* Martha!" whispered Claire. "What do you mean by coming home so late, all tired out and worked to death! It is shameful! But here's a good cup of hot chocolate, and some big plummy buns to cheer you up. And I've got some good news for you besides. I didn't mean to tell right off, but I just can't keep in for another minute. *I've got a job!* A fine, three-hundred-dollars-a-year-and-home-and-laundry job! And a raise, as soon as I show I'm worth it! Now, what do you think of that? Isn't it splendid? Isn't it—*bully?*"

She had noiselessly guided Martha into her own room, got her things off, and seated her in a comfortable Morris chair before the lighted oil-stove, from whose pierced iron top a golden light gleamed cheerily, reflecting on the ceiling above in a curious pattern.

"Be careful of the chocolate, it's burning hot. I kept it simmering till I heard you shut the vestibule door. And—— O, yes! No danger in

sipping it that way! But you haven't asked a single thing about my job. How I came to know of it in the first place, and how I was clever enough to get it after I'd applied! You don't look a bit pleased and excited over it, you bad Martha! And you ought to be so glad, because I won't need to spend anything *like* all the money I'll get. I'm to have my home and laundry free, and one can't make many outside expenses in a boarding-school 'way off in Schoharie—and so I can send you a lot and a lot of dollars, till we're all squared up and smoothed out, and you won't have to work so hard any more, and——"

"Say now, Miss Claire, you certaintly are the fastest thing on record. If you'd been born a train, you'd been an express, shoor-pop an' no mistake. Didn't I tell you to hold on, pationate an' uncomplainin', till I giv' you the sign? Didn't I say I had my eye on a job for you that was a job worth talkin' about? One that'd be satisfactry all around. Well, then! An' here you are, tellin' me about you goin' to the old Harry, or some such, with home an' laundry thrown in. Not on your life you ain't, Miss Claire, an' that (beggin' your pardon!) is all there is *to* it!"

"But, Martha——"

"Don't let's waste no more words. The thing ain't to be thought of."

"But, Martha, it's over two weeks since you

said that, about having an idea about a certain job for me that was going to be so splendid. Don't you know it is? And I thought it had fallen through. I didn't like to speak about it, for fear you'd think I was hurrying you, but two weeks are two weeks, and I can't go on indefinitely staying here, and getting so deep in debt I'll never be able to get out again. And I saw this advertisement in *The Outlook*. 'Twas for a college graduate to teach High School English in a girls' boarding-school, and I went to the agency, and they were very nice, and told me to write to the Principal, and I did—told her all about myself, my experience tutoring, and all that, and this morning came the letter saying she'd engage me. I can tell you all about Schoharie, Martha. It's 'up-state' and——"

"Miss Claire, child, no! It won't do. I can't consent. I can't have you throwin' away golden opportoonities to work like a toojan for them as'll stint you in the wash, an' prob'ly give you oleomargerine instead of butter, an' cold-storage eggs that had forgot there was such a thing as a hen, long before they ever was laid away. I wasn't born yesterday, myself, an' I know how they treat the teachers in some o' them schools. The young-lady scholars, so stylish an' rich, as full of airs as a music-box, snubbin' the teacher because they're too ignorant to know how smart *she* has

to be, to get any knowledge into their stupid heads, an' the Principal always eyein' you like a minx, 'less you might be wastin' her precious time an' not earnin' the elegant sal'ry she gives you, includin' your home an' laundry. O my! I know a thing or two about them schools, an' a few other places. No, Miss Claire, dear, it won't do. An' besides, I have you bespoke for Mrs. Sherman. The last thing before I come away from the house this night, she sent for me upstairs, an' ast me didn't I know some one could engage with her for Radcliffe—to learn him his lessons, an' how to be a little lady, an' suchlike. She wants, as you might say, a trained mother for'm, while his own untrained one is out gallivantin' the streets, shoppin', an' playin' bridge, an' attendin' the horse-show.

"I hemmed an' hawed an' scratched my head to see if, happen, I did know anybody suitable, an' after a while (not to seem to make you too cheap, or not to look like I was jumpin' down her throat) I told her: 'Curious enough, I do know just the one I think will please you—*if* you can get her.'

"Then she ast me a lot about you, an' I told her what I know, an' for the rest I trusted to Providence, an' in the end we made a sorter deal —so's it's all fixed you're to go there day after to-morrer, to talk to her, an' let her look you over.

An' if you're the kind o' stuff she wants, she'll take a half-a-dozen yards o' you, which is the kind o' way those folks has with people they pay money to. I promised Mrs. Sherman you'd come, an' I couldn't break my word to her, now could I? I'd be like to lose my own job if I did, an' I'm sure you wouldn't ast that o' me!"

"But," said Claire, troubled, "you told me Radcliffe is so unmanageable."

Mrs. Slawson devoted herself to her chocolate and buns for a moment or two. "O, never you fear about Radcliffe," she announced at length. "He's a good little fella enough, as little fellas goes. When you know how to handle'm—which is *right side up* with care. Him an' me come to an understandin' yesterday mornin', an' he's as meek an' gentle as a baa-lamb ever since. I'll undertake you'll have no trouble with Radcliffe."

"Is this the wonderful plan you spoke of? Is *this* the job you said was going to be so satisfactory all 'round?" inquired Claire, her misgivings, in connection with her prospective pupil, by no means allayed.

"Well, not eggsackly. I can't say it is. *That* job will come later. But we got to be patiónate, an' not spoil it by upsettin' our kettles o' fish with boardin'-schools, an' such nonsense. Meanwhile we can put in time with Mrs. Sherman, who'll pay you well, an' won't be too skittish if you just

keep a firm hand on her. This mornin' she got discoursin' about everythin' under the canopy, from nickel-plated bathroom fixin's, an' marble slobs, to that state o' life unto which it has pleased God to call me. She told me just what I'd oughter give my fam'ly to eat, an' how much I'd oughter pay for it, an'—I say, but wasn't she grand to have give me all that good advice free?"

Claire laughed. "She certainly was, and now you've just *got* to go to bed. I don't dare look at the clock, it's so late. Good-night, you *good* Martha! And thank you, from way deep down, for all you've done for me."

But long after Mrs. Slawson had disappeared, the girl sat in the solitude of her shadowy room thinking—thinking—thinking. Unable to get away from her thoughts. There was something about this plan, to which Martha had committed her, that frightened, overawed her. She felt a strange impulse to resist it, to follow her own leading, and go to the school instead. She knew her feeling was childish. Suppose Radcliffe were to be unruly, why, how could she tell that the girls in the Schoharie school might not prove even more so? The fact was, she argued, she had unconsciously allowed herself to be prejudiced against Mrs. Sherman and the boy, by Martha's whimsical accounts of them, good-natured as they were.

And this strange, premonitory instinct was no premonitory instinct at all, it was just the natural reluctance of a shy nature to face a new and uncongenial situation. And yet—and yet—and yet, try as she would, she could not shake off the impression that, beyond it all, there loomed something a hidden inner sense made her hesitate to approach.

Just that moment, a dim, untraceable association of ideas drew her back until she was face-to-face with a long-forgotten incident in her very-little girlhood. Once upon a time, there had been a moment when she had experienced much the same sort of feeling she had now—the feeling of wanting to cry out and run away. As a matter of fact, she *had* cried out and run away. Why, and from what? As it came back to her, not from anything altogether terrible. On the contrary, something rather alluring, but so unfamiliar that she had shrunk back from it, protesting, resisting. What was it? Claire suddenly broke into a smothered little laugh and covered her face with her hands, before the vision of herself, squawking madly, like a startled chicken, and running away from " big " handsome, twelve-year-old Bobby Van Brandt, who had just announced to the world at large, that " he liked Claire Lang a lot, 'n' she was his best girl, 'n' he was goin' to kiss her." She had been mortally

frightened, had screamed, and run away, but (so unaccountable is the heart of woman) she had never liked Bobby quite so well after that, because he had shown the white feather and hadn't carried out his purpose, in spite of her.

But if she should scream and run away now, there would be none to pursue. Her foolish outburst would disturb no one. She could cry and cry, and run and run, and there would be no big Bobby Van Brandt, or any one else to hear and follow.

An actual echo of the cries she had not uttered seemed to mock her foolish musing. She paused and listened. Again and again came the muffled sounds, and, at last, so distinct they seemed, she went to her door, unlatched it, and stood, listening, on the threshold.

From Martha's room rose a deep rumble, as of a distant murmurous sea.

"Mr. Slawson. He's awake. He must have heard the crying, too. O, it's begun again! How awful! Martha, what is it, O, what is it?" for Mrs. Slawson had appeared in her own doorway, and was standing, night-robed and ghostly, listening attentively to the intermittent signs of distress.

"It's that bloomin' Dutchman, Langbein, acrost the hall. Every time he goes on a toot, he comes back an' wallops his wife for it. Go to

bed, Miss Claire, child, an' don't let it worry you. It ain't *your* funeral."

Came the voice of big Sam Slawson from within his chamber:

"Just what I say to *you,* my dear. It ain't your funeral. Come back, Martha, an' go to bed."

"Well, that's another pair o' shoes, entirely, Sammy," whispered Martha. "This business has been goin' on long enough, an' I ain't proposin' to put up with it no longer. Such a state o' things has nothin' to recommend it. If it'd help such a poor ninny as Mrs. Langbein any to beat her, I'd say, 'Go ahead! Never mind *us!*' But you couldn't pound sense inter a softy like her, no matter what you done. In the first place, she lets that fella get away from her evenin's when, if she'd an ounce o' sense, she could keep him stickin' so close at home, a capcine plaster wouldn't be in it. Then, when he comes home, a little the worse for wear, she ups an' reproaches 'm, which, God knows, that ain't no time to argue with a man. You don't want to *argue* with a fella when he's so. You just want to *tell*'m. Tell'm with the help of a broomstick if you want to, but *tell*'m, or leave'm alone. An' it's bad for the childern—all this is—it's bad for Cora an' Francie. What idea'll they get o' the holy estate o' matrimony, I should like to know? That the *man* has the upper

hand? That's a *nice* notion for a girl to grow up with, nowadays. Hark! My, but he's givin' it to her good an' plenty this time! Sammy Slawson, shame on ye, man! to let a poor woman be beat like that, an' never raise a hand to save your own childern from bein' old maids. Another scream outer her, an' I'll go in myself, in the face of you."

"Now, Martha, be sensible!" pleaded Sam Slawson. "You can't break into a man's house without his consent."

"Can't I? Well, just you watch me close, an' you'll see if I can't."

"You'll make yourself liable to the law. He's her husband, you know. She can complain to the courts, if she's got any kick comin'. But it's not *my* business to go interferin' between husband and wife. 'What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder.'"

Martha wagged an energetic assent.

"Shoor! That certaintly lets *you* out. But there ain't no mention made o' *woman* not bein' on the job, is there?"

She covered the narrow width of the hall in a couple of strides, and beat her knuckles smartly against the panel of the opposite door.

By this time the baluster-railing, all the way up, was festooned with white-clad tenants, bending over, looking down.

"Martha," protested Sam Slawson, "you're in your nightgown! You can't go round like that! Everybody's lookin' at you!"

"Say, you—Mr. Langbein in there! Open the door. It's me! Mrs. Slawson! Let me in!" was Martha's only reply. Her keen ear, pressed against the panel, heard nothing in response but an oath, following another even more ungodly sound, and then the choking misery of a woman's convulsive sobs.

Mrs. Slawson set her shoulder against the door, braced herself for a mighty effort, and——

"Did you ever see the like of her?" muttered Sam, as, still busy fastening the garments he had hurriedly pulled on, he followed his wife into the Langbeins' flat, into the Langbeins' bedroom. There he saw her resolutely march up to the irate German, swing him suddenly about, and send him crashing, surprised, unresisting, to the opposite side of the room. For a second she stood regarding him scornfully.

"You poor, low-lived Dutchman, you!" she brought out with deliberation. "What d'you mean layin' your hand to a woman who hasn't the stren'th or the spirit to turn to, an' lick you back? Why don't you fight a fella your own size an' sect? That's fair play! A fine man *you* are! A fine neighbor *you* are! Just let me hear a peep out of you, an' I'll thrash you this minit

to within a inch of your life. *I* don't need no law nor no policeman to keep the peace in any house where I live. I can keep the peace myself, if I have to lick every tenant in the place! I'm the law an' the policeman on my own account, an' if you budge from that floor till I tell you get up, I'll come over there an' set down on ye so hard, your wife won't know you from a pancake in the mornin'. I'll show you the power o' the *press!*"

Sam Slawson was no coward, but his face was pallid with consternation at Martha's hardihood. His mighty bulk, however, seeming to supplement hers, had its effect on the sobered German. He did not attempt to rise.

"As to you, you poor weak sister," said Mrs. Slawson, turning to the wife, "you've had your last lickin' so long as you live in this house. Believe *me!* I'm a hard-workin' woman, but I'm never too tired or too busy to come in an' take a round out of your old man, if he should ever dare lay finger to you again. *I* don't mind a friendly scrap oncet in a while with a neighbor. My muscles is good for more than your fat, beer-drinkin' Dutchman's any day. Let him up an' try 'em oncet, an' he'll see. Why don't you have some style about you an' land him one, where it'll do the most good, or else—*leave* him? But no, you wouldn't do that—I *know* you wouldn't!

Some women has to cling to somethin', no matter if they have to support it themselves."

Mrs. Langbein's inarticulate sobbing had passed into a spasmodic struggle for breathless utterance.

"He—don't mean—no harm, Mis' Slawson. He's all right—ven he's soper. Only—it preaks my heart ven he vips me, und I don't deserve it."

"Breaks your heart? It ain't your *heart I'm* worryin' about. If he don't break your bones you're in luck!"

"Und I try to pe a goot vife to him. I tend him hand und foot."

"Ye-es, I know you do," returned Martha dryly. "But suppose you just try the *foot* in the future. See how it works."

"I to my pest mit dryin' to pe a goot cook. I geep his house so glean as a bin. Vat I *don't* do, Gott weiss, I don't know it. I ain't esk him for ein tcent already. I ain't drouble him mit pills off of de grocer oder de putcher, oder anny-von. I makes launtry efery veek for some liddle peoples, und mit mine own money I bays my pills. Ven you dell me how it iss I could make eferyting more smoother for him, I do it!"

"That's eggsackly the trouble," proclaimed Mrs. Slawson conclusively. "You make 'em too smooth. You make 'em so smooth, they're ackchelly slippery. No wonder the poor fella falls

down. No man wants to spend all his life skatin' round, doin' fancy-figger stunts, because his wife's a dummy. Let'm get down to hard earth, an' if he kicks, heave a rock at'm. He'll soon stand up, an' walk straight like a little man. Let *him* lend a hand with the dooty-business, for a change. It'll take his attention off'n himself, give'm a rest from thinkin' he's an angel, an' that you hired out, when you married'm, to shout 'Glory!' every time he flaps a wing! That sort o' thing ain't healthy for men. It don't agree with their constitutions—— An' now, good-night to you, an' may you have sweet dreams! Mr. Langbein, I ain't the slightest objeckshun to your gettin' up, if you want to. You know me now. I'm by the day, as you may have heard. But I can turn my hand to an odd job like this now an' then by the night, if it's necess'ry, so let me hear no more from you, sir, an' then we'll all be good friends, like we're partin' now. Good-night!"

CHAPTER VIII

BEFORE setting out for his work the next morning, Sam Slawson tried to prepare Ma and Miss Lang for the more than probable appearance, during the day, of the officer of the law, he predicted Friedrich Langbein would have engaged to prosecute Martha.

"He has a clear case against you, mother, no doubt o' that. You'd no business in his place at all, let alone that you assaulted an' battered him. He can make it hot for us, an' I don't doubt he will."

Mrs. Slawson attended with undivided care to the breakfast needs of such of her flock as still remained to be fed. The youngsters had all vanished.

"If he wants to persecute me, let him persecute me. I guess I got a tongue in my head. I can tell the judge a thing or two which, bein' prob'ly a mother himself, he'll see the sense of. Do you think I want Sammy growin' up under my very eyes, a beer-drinkin' wife-beater?—because he seen the eggsample of it set before'm by a Dutchman, when he was a boy? Such things makes an impression on the young—which they ain't sense

enough to know the difference between a eggsample an' a warnin'. An' the girls, too! As I told you las' night, it's bad for the country when matrimony ain't made to look like a prize-package, no matter what it *reely* is. What's goin' to become o' the population, I should like to know? Here's Cora now, wantin' to be a telefoam-girl when she grows up, an' there's no knowin' what Francie'll choose. But you can take it from me, they'll both of 'em drop their votes for the single life. They'll perfer to thump a machine o' their own, with twelve or fifteen *per,* comin' to 'em, rather than be the machine that's thumped, an' pay for the privilege out'n their own pockets besides."

As fate would have it, the day went placidly by, in spite of Mr. Slawson's somber prognostications. No one came to disturb the even tenor of its way. Then, at eveningfall, while Martha was still absent, there was a gentle rap upon the door, and Claire, anxious to anticipate Ma, made haste to answer it, and saw a stranger standing on the threshold. It was difficult, at first, to distinguish details in the dusk of the dim hallway, but after a moment she made out the rotund figure of Mr. Langbein. She could not see his face, but his voice was more than conciliatory.

"Eggscoose me, lady!" he began apologetically. "I haf for Mis' Slawson a liddle bresent here. I tink she like it. She look so goot-

netchered, und I know she iss kind to bum animals. My vife, her Maltee cat vas having some liddle kittens already, a mont' ago. I tink Mis' Slawson, she lige to hef von off dem pussies, ja? Annyhow, I bring her von here, und I esk you vill gif it to her mit my tanks, und my kint regarts, und pest vishes und annyting else you tink I could do for her. You tell Mis' Slawson I lige her to esk me to do someting whenefer she needs it—yes?"

"Now what do you think of that?" was Martha's only comment, when Claire related the incident, and great Sam Slawson shook with laughter till his sides ached, and a fit of coughing set in, and said it was "a caution, but Mother always did have a winning way about her with the men."

"It's well I have, or I wouldn't 'a' drew you, Sammy—an' you shoor are a trump—only I wisht you'd get rid o' that cough—— You had it just about long enough," Martha responded, half in mockery, half in affectionate earnest.

"An' now, me lad, leave us be, me an' Miss Claire. We has things of importance to talk over. It's to-morrow at ten she's to go see Mrs. Sherman. Miss Claire, you must be lookin' your best, for the first minit the madam claps eyes to you, that'll be the decidin' minit for *you*. Have you everything you need, ready to your hand? Is

all your little laces an' frills done up fresh an' tidy, so's you can choose the becomingest? Where's that lace butterfly for your neck, I like so much? I washed it as careful as could be, a couple o' weeks ago, but have you wore it since?"

Claire hesitated. "I think I'll put on the simplest things I've got, Martha," she replied evasively. "Just one of my linen shirtwaists, with the stiff collar and cuffs. No fluffy ruffles at all."

"But that scrap o' lace at your throat, ain't fluffy ruffles. An' stiff, starched things don't kinder become you, Miss Claire. They ain't your style. You don't wanter look like you been dressed by your worst enemy, do you? You're so little an' dainty, you got to have delicate things to go *with* you. Say, just try that butterfly on you now. I want to see if it'll do, all right."

By this time Claire knew Martha well enough to realize it was useless to attempt to temporize or evade.

"I can't wear the butterfly, Martha dear," she said.

"Why can't you?"

"Well, now please, *please* don't worry, but I can't wear it, because I can't find it. I dare say it'll turn up some day when I least expect, but just now, it seems to be lost."

Martha looked grave. "It come out o' the

wash all right, didn't it?" she inquired anxiously. "I remember distinkly leavin' it soak in the suds, so's there wouldn't be no strain-like, rubbin' it, an' the dust'd just drop out natural. But now I come to think of it, I don't recklect ironin' it. Now honest, did it come outer the wash, Miss Claire?"

"No, Martha—but——"

"There ain't no *but* about it. I musta gone an' lost your pretty lace for you, an' it was reel at that!"

"Never mind! It's of no consequence. Truly, please don't——"

"Worry? Shoor I won't worry. What's the use worryin'? But I'll make it right, you betcher life, which is much more to the purpose. Say, I shouldn't wonder but it got into the tub someways, an' then, when I let the water out, the suckage drew it down the pipe. Believe *me,* that's the very thing that happened, and—'I'll never see sweet Annie any more!'"

"It doesn't make a particle of difference, Martha. I never liked that butterfly as much as you did, you know."

"Perhaps you did an' perhaps you didn't, but all the same you're *out* a neck-fixin', an' it's *my* fault, an' so you're bound to let me get square, to save my face, Miss Claire. You see how it is, don't you? Well, last Christmas, Mrs. Granville

she give me a lace jabbow—reel Irish mull an' Carrickmacross (that's lace from the old country, as you know as well as me). She told me all about it. Fine? It'd break your heart to think o' one o' them poor innercent colleens over there pricklin' her eyes out, makin' such grandjer for the like o' me, when no doubt she thought she was doin' it for some great dame, would be sportin' it out loud, in her auta on Fifth Avenoo. What use have I, in my business, for that kinder decoration, I should like to know! It'd only be distractin' me, gettin' in me pails when I'm scrubbin'. An' by the time Cora an' Francie is grown up, jabbows will be *out.* I'd much more use for the five-dollar-bill was folded up in the box alongside. *That,* now, was becomin' to my peculiar style o' beauty. But the jabbow! There ain't no use talkin', Miss Claire, you'll have to take it off'n my hands, I mean my chest, an' then we'll be quits on the butterfly business, an' no thanks to your nose on either side."

It was useless to protest.

The next morning when Claire started forth to beard the lioness in her den, she was tricked out in all the bravery of Martha's really beautiful "jabbow," and looked "as pretty as a picture, an' then some," as Mrs. Slawson confidentially assured Sam.

But the heart beneath the frilly lace and mull

was anything but brave. It felt, in fact, quite as white and fluttery as the *jabbow* looked, and when Claire found herself being actually ushered into the boudoir of the august *presence,* and told to "wait please," she thought it would stop altogether for very abject fright.

Martha had tried, in a sort of casual, matter-of-course way, to prepare her little lady for the trial, by dropping hints every now and then, as to the best methods of dealing with employers—the proper way to carry oneself, when one "went to live out in private fam'lies."

"You see, you always been the private fam'ly yourself, Miss Claire, so it'll come kinder strange to you first-off, to look at things the other way. But it won't be so bad after you oncet get used to it. There's one thing it's good to remember. Them high-toned folks has somehow got it fixed in their minds that *the rich must not be annoyed,* so it'll be money in your pocket, as the sayin' is, if you can do your little stunt without makin' any fuss about it, or drawin' their attention. Just saw wood an' say nothin', as my husband says.

"Mrs. Sherman she told me, when I first went there, an' Radcliffe was a little baby, she 'strickly forbid anybody to touch'm.' It was on account o' what she called *germs* or somethin'. Well, I never had no particular yearnin' to inflect him with none o' my germs, but when she was off galli-

vantin', an' that poor little lonesome fella used to cry, an' put out his arms to be took, I'd take'm, an' give'm the only reel mother-huggin' he ever had in his life, an' no harm to any of us—to me that give it, or him that got it, or her that was no wiser. Then, later, when he was four or five, an' around that, she got a notion he was a angel-child, an' she'd useter go about tellin' the help, an' other folks, 'he must be guided by love alone.' I remember she said oncet he'd be 'as good as a kitten for hours at a time if you only give'm a ball of twine to play with.' Well, his nurse, she give'm the ball of twine one day when she had somethin' doin' that took up all her time an' attention on her own account, an' when she come back from her outin', you couldn't walk a step in the house without breakin' your leg (the nurse she did sprain her ankle), on account o' the cat's-cradle effect the young villain had strung acrost the halls, an' from one doorknob to the other, so there wasn't an inch o' the place free. An' he'd got the tooth-paste toobs, an' squoze out the insides, an' painted over every bit o' mahogany he could find—doors, an' furnitur', an' all. You can take it from me, that house was a sight after the angel-child got through with it. The girls an' me—the whole push—was workin' like mad clearin' up after'm before the madam'd come home, an' the nurse cryin' her eyes out for the

pain, an' scared stiff 'less she'd be sent packin'. Also, 'if Radcliffe asked questions, we was to answer them truthful,' was another rule. An' the puzzles he'd put to you! One day, I remember, he got me cornered with a bunch that was such fierce propositions, Solomon in all his glory couldn't 'a' give him their truthful answers. Says he—Radcliffe, not Solomon—says he: 'I want another leg.'

"'You can't have it,' says I.

"'Why?' says he.

"'They ain't pervided,' I says. 'Little boys that's well-reggerlated, don't have but two legs.'

"'Why don't they?'

"'Because God thought two was enough for'm.'

"'Why did God think tho?'

"'You ask too many questions.'

"'Well, but—juth lithen—I want to know—now lithen—doth puthy-caths lay eggth?'

"'No!'

"'Why don't puthy-caths lay eggth?'

"'Because hens has a corner on the egg business.'

"'Why have they?'

"'Because they're born lucky, like Mr. Carnegie an' Mr. Rockefella.'

"'Doth Mr. Carnegie an' Mr. Rockefella——'

"'*No!*'

"'Why don't they?'

"'Say, Radcliffe, I ain't had a hard day,' says I. 'But *you* make me tired.'

"'Why do I? Now—juth wonth more—now —now lithen wonth more—ith God a lady?'"

As Claire sat waiting for Mrs. Sherman, stray scraps of recollection, such as these, flitted through her mind and helped to while the time away. Then, as she still waited, she grew gradually more composed, less unfamiliar with her surroundings, and the strange predicament in which she found herself. She could, at length, look at the door she supposed led into Mrs. Sherman's room, without such a quick contraction of the heart as caused her breath to come in labored gasps, could make some sort of sketchy outline of the part she was foreordained to take in the coming interview, and not find herself barren of resource, even if Mrs. Sherman *should* say so-and-so, instead of so-and-so.

She had waited so long, had had such ample time to get herself well in hand, that when, at last, a door opened (not Mrs. Sherman's door at all, but another), and a tall, upright masculine figure appeared in the doorway, she at once jumped to the conclusion it was Shaw, the butler, come to summon her into *the presence,* and rose to follow, without too much inner perturbation.

"Mrs. Sherman is prevented from keeping her appointment with you this morning," descended to her from an altitude far above her own. "She hopes you will excuse her. She has asked me to talk with you in her stead. You are Miss Lang, I believe? I am Mrs. Sherman's brother. My name is Ronald."

CHAPTER IX

IT is hard to readjust all one's prearranged plans in the twinkling of an eye. Claire felt as if she had received a sudden dash of cold water square in the face. She quite gulped from the shock of it. How in the world was she to adapt herself to this brand-new set of conditions on such short notice—on no notice at all? How was she to be anything but awkwardly monosyllabic?

"Sit down, please."

Obediently she sat.

"Martha—Mrs. Slawson—tells me, your father was Judge Lang of Michigan?"

"Yes—Grand Rapids."

"You are a college graduate?"

"Wellesley."

"You have taught before?"

"I tutored a girl throughout a whole summer. Prepared her for her college entrance exams."

"She passed creditably?"

"She wasn't conditioned in anything."

"How are you on discipline?"

"I don't know."

"You have had no experience? Never tried your hand at training a boy, for example?"

Claire's blue-gray eyes grew suddenly audacious, and the bridge of her short nose wrinkled up delightfully in a roguish smile.

"I trained my father. He was a dear old boy —the dearest in the world. He used to say he had never been brought up, until I came along. He used to say I ruled him with a rod of iron. But he was very well-behaved before I got through with him. He was quite a model boy, really."

Glancing quickly up into the steadfast eyes that had, at first, seemed to her so stern as to be almost forbidding, she met an expression so mild, so full of winning kindness, that she suddenly remembered and understood what Martha had meant when she said once: "A body wouldn't call the queen her cousin when he looks at you like that!"

"Your father was a credit to your bringing-up, certainly. I never had the honor of meeting Judge Lang, but I knew him by reputation. I remember to have heard some one say of him once—'He was a judge after Socrates' own heart. He heard courteously, he answered wisely, he considered soberly, he decided impartially. Added to this, he was one whom kings could not corrupt.' That is an enviable record."

Claire's eyes filled with grateful moisture, but

she did not allow them to overflow. She nodded rapidly once or twice in a quaint, characteristic little fashion, and then sat silent, examining the links in her silver-meshed purse, with elaborate attention.

"Perhaps Mrs. Slawson has told you that my young nephew is something of a pickle."

The question restored Claire at once. "I'm fond of pickles."

"Good! I believe there are said to be fifty-eight varieties. Are you prepared to smack your lips over him, whichever he may be?"

"Well, if I can't smack my lips, there's always the alternative of smacking *him*."

Mr. Ronald laughed. "Not allowed," he announced regretfully. "My sister won't have it. Radcliffe is to be guided 'by love alone.'"

"Whose love, please? His or mine?"

Again Mr. Ronald laughed. "Now you've got me!" he admitted. "Perhaps a little of both. Do you think you could supply your share? I have no doubt of your being able to secure his."

"I like children. We've always managed to hit it off pretty well, the kiddies and I, but, of course, I can't guarantee anything definite in connection with your little boy, because, you see, I've never been a governess before. I've only had to do with youngsters who've come a-visiting, or else

the small, lower East-siders at the Settlement. But I'll promise to do my best."

"'Who does the best his circumstance allows, does well, acts nobly. *Angles* could no more,' as I wrote in my sister's autograph-album when I was a boy," announced Mr. Ronald gravely.

Claire smiled over at him with appreciation. "I'd love to come and try," she said heartily.

She did not realize she had lost all sensation of alarm, had forgotten her altered position, that she was no longer one whom these people would regard as their social equal. She was talking as one talks to a friend.

"And if Radcliffe doesn't get on—if he doesn't improve, I should say—if you don't *like* me, you can always send me away, you know."

For a very long moment Mr. Ronald sat silent. So long a moment, indeed, that Claire, waiting in growing suspense for his answer, suddenly remembered all those things she had forgotten, and her earlier embarrassment returned with a wave of bitter self-reproach. She accused herself of having been too free. She had overstepped her privilege. It was not apparent to her that he was trying to visualize the picture she had drawn, the possibility of his *not liking her and sending her away, you know,* and that, to his utter consternation, he found it was something he could not in the least conceive of himself as doing. That, on the

contrary, the vision of her going away for any reason, of her passing out of his life, now she had once stepped into it, left him with a chill sensation in the cardiac region that was as unexpected as it was disturbing. When he spoke at last, it was with a quick, authoritative brevity that seemed to Claire to bear out her apprehension, and prove he thought she had forgotten her place, her new place as "hired help," and must be checked lest she presume on good nature and take a tone to her employers that was not to be tolerated.

"You will come without fail on Monday morning."

"Very well."

Her manner was so studiously cold and ceremonious, so sharply in contrast with her former piquant friendliness, that Mr. Ronald looked up in surprise.

"It is convenient for you to come on Monday, I hope?"

"Perfectly."

"I presume my sister, Mrs. Sherman, will take up with you the question of—er—compensation."

"O——" quickly, with a little shudder, "that's all right!"

"If it isn't all right, it shall be made so," said Mr. Ronald cordially.

Claire winced. "It is quite, it is perfectly all

right!" she repeated hurriedly, anxious to escape the distasteful subject, still smarting under the lash of her own self-condemnation—her own wounded pride.

How could she have forgotten, even for a moment, that she was no longer in a position to deal with these people on equal terms? That now, kindness on their part meant patronage, on hers presumption. Of course, she deserved the snub she had received. But, all the same, it hurt! O, but it hurt! She knew her George Eliot well. It was a pity she did not recall and apply a certain passage in Maggie Tulliver's experience.

"It did not occur to her that her irritation was due to the pleasanter emotion which preceded it, just as when we are satisfied with a sense of glowing warmth, an innocent drop of cold water may fall upon us with a sudden smart."

Mr. Ronald, searching her face for some clue to the abrupt change in her voice and manner, saw her cheeks grow white, her lips and chin quiver painfully.

"You are not well?" he asked, after a second of troubled groping in the dark.

"O, perfectly." She recollected Martha's injunction, "Never you let on to 'em, any of your worries. The rich must not be annoyed," and pulled herself together with a determined mental grip.

"It is good that, being so far away from home, you can be under the care of your old nurse," observed Mr. Ronald thoughtfully.

"My old nurse," Claire mechanically repeated, preoccupied with her own painful meditations.

"Martha. It is good, it certainly must be comforting to those who care for you, to know you are being looked after by so old and trusted a family servant."

Claire did not reply. She was hardly conscious he was speaking.

"When Martha first mentioned you to me—to Mrs. Sherman, rather—she described you as her young lady. She has a very warm feeling for you. I think she considers you in the light of personal property, like a child of her own. That's excusable—it's commendable, even, in such a case as this. I believe she said she nursed you till you were able to walk."

With a shock of sudden realization, Claire waked to the fact that something was wrong somewhere—something that it was *up to* her to make right at once. And yet, it was all so cloudy, so confused in her mind with her duty to Martha, her duty to herself, and to these people—her fear of being again kindly but firmly put back in her *place* if she ventured the merest fraction of an inch beyond the boundary prescribed by this

grandee of the autocratic bearing and "keep-off-the-grass expression," that she hesitated, and her opportunity was lost.

"I think I must go now," she announced abruptly, and rose, got past him somehow, and made blindly for the door. Then there was the dim vista of the long hall stretching before her, like a path of escape, and she fled its length, and down that of the staircase. Then out at the street-door, and into the chill of the cold December noonday.

When she had vanished, Francis Ronald stood a moment with eyes fixed in the direction she had taken. Then, abruptly, he seized the telephone that stood upon the table beside him, switched it to connect with the basement region, and called for Mrs. Slawson.

"This is Mr. Ronald speaking. Is Martha there?"

"Yes, sir. Please hold the wire, and I'll call her."

"Be quick!"

"Yes, sir!"

A second, and Martha's voice repeated his name. "Mr. Ronald, this is Martha!"

"Good! I want you to put on your things at once, and follow Miss Lang," he directed briefly. "I do not think she's sick, but as she was talking to me, I noticed she grew suddenly quite pale, and

seemed troubled and anxious. Waste no time! Go at once!"

The only answer was a sharp click over the wire, as Mrs. Slawson snapped the receiver into its crotch.

But though Claire was not five minutes in advance of her, Martha was unable to make up the distance between them, and by the time she had mounted the stairs leading to the Elevated, and stood panting for breath on the platform, the train she had hoped to catch was to be seen disappearing around the curve at Fifty-third Street.

All the way uptown she speculated as to the why and wherefore of Mr. Ronald's immediate concern about Claire.

"It's kinder previous, his gettin' so stirred up over her at this stage o' the game," she pondered. "It ain't natural, or it ain't lucky. I'd much liefer have it go slower, an' be more thora. A thing like this affair I'm tryin' to menoover, is like some o' the things you cook. You want to leave 'em get good an' het-up before the stirrin' begins. If they're stirred up too soon, they're ap' to cruddle on you, an' never get that nice, smooth, thick, *gooey* look you like to see in rich custuds, same as love-affairs. I hope she didn't go an' have a scare on, an' give 'em to think she ain't healthy. She's as sound as a nut, but if Mis' Sherman once is fixed with the notion she's sub-

jeck to faint-spells, nothin' on earth will change her mind, an' then it'll be nit, not, nohow for Martha's little scheme. I must caution Miss Claire about showin' the white feather. No matter how weak-kneed she feels, she's just *got* to buck up an' ack like she's a soldier. That's how——"

Martha had reached her own street, and was turning the corner, when she stopped with a sensation as of a quick, fierce clutching at her heart. Evidently there had been some sort of accident, for a great crowd was gathered on the sidewalk, and beside the gutter-curbstone, just ahead of her, stood waiting an ambulance. Her healthy, normal mind did not easily jump at tragic conclusions. She did not, as a general thing, fear the worst, did not even accept it when it came, but now, somehow, a close association of ideas suggested Claire in an instant, and before ever she had stirred a step, she saw in her mind's eye the delicate little form she loved, lying injured, maybe mangled, stretched out upon the asphalt, in the midst of the curious throng.

She hurried, hurried faster than any of the others who were also hurrying, and pushed her way on through the press to the very edge of the crowd. A crying woman caught wildly at her arm, as she stood for a second struggling to advance.

"It's a child!—A little girl—run over by an automobile! O God help the poor mother!" the stranger sobbed hysterically.

Martha freed herself from the clinging fingers and pressed forward. "A child—Miss Claire's such a little thing, no wonder they think she's a child," she murmured. "True for you, my good woman, God help the poor mother!"

"You know her?"

"I know Miss Claire."

For some reason the crowd made way, and let her through to the very heart of it, and there—sure enough, there was Claire, but Claire crying and kneeling over an outstretched little form, lying unconscious on the pavement.

"Why, it's—my Francie!" said Martha quietly.

CHAPTER X

THROUGH all the days of suspense and doubt, Claire swung like a faithful little pendulum between home, the Shermans, and the hospital.

Then, as hope strengthened, she was the bearer of gifts, flowers, fruit, toys from Mr. Ronald and his sister, which Martha acknowledged in her own characteristic fashion.

"Tell'm the Slawson fam'ly is bound to be *in it*. It seems it's the whole style for ladies to go under a operation, an' as I ain't eggsackly got the time, Francie, she's keepin' up the tone for us. If you wanter folla the fashions these days, you got to gather your skirts about you, tight as they are, an' run. But what's a little inconvenience, compared with knowin' you're cuttin' a dash!

"Tell'm I thank'm, an' tell Lor'—Mister Ronald, it's good of'm to be tryin' to get damages for Francie out o' the auta that run her down, an' if there was somethin' comin' to us to pay the doctors an' suchlike, it'd be welcome. But, somehow, I always was shy o' monkeyin' with the law. It's like to catch a body in such queer places, where

you'd least expect. Before a fella knows it, he's *up* for liable, or breaches o' promise, an' his private letters to the bosom of his fam'ly (which nowadays they're mostly ruffles), his letters to the bosom of his fam'ly is read out loud in court, an' then printed in the papers next mornin', an' everybody's laughin' at'm, because he called his wife 'My darlin' Tootsie,' which she never been accustomed to answer to anythin' but the name o' Sarah. An' it's up to him to pay the costs, when ten to one it's the other party's to blame. I guess p'raps we better leave good enough alone. If we begin to get the l'yers after us, no tellin' where we'll end. Who knows but they might find the accident injured the auto, 'stead o' Francie. If we work hard, an' they give us time, me an' Sammy can, maybe, make out to pay the doctors. But add to that, to have to buy a brand-new machine for the fella that run over Francie—that'd be sorter discouragin'."

She paused, and Claire began to pull on her gloves.

"By the way," said Martha, "how's things down to the Shermans'? Seems like a hunderd years since I was there. The las' time I laid eyes on Eliza, she was in excellent spirits—I seen the bottle. I wonder if she's still—very still, takin' a sly nip on the side, as she calls it, which means a sly nip off the sideboard. You can take it from

me, if she don't let up, before she knows it she'll be a teetotal wrack."

"I haven't had the pleasure of meeting Eliza," observed Claire, smiling.

"Why, of course, you haven't, which it wouldn't be a pleasure, anyhow. But what I reely want to know is, how you makin' out with Radcliffe? I been so took up with Francie all this while, I clean forgot to ask before. Is he behavin' all right? Does he mind what you say? Does he do his lessons good?"

Claire's brows drew together in a troubled little frown, as she labored over the clasp of her glove.

"O, Radcliffe," she let fall carelessly. "Radcliffe's an unruly little Hessian, of course, but I suppose all boys are mischievous at times."

Martha pondered. "Well, not all boys are mischievous in just the same way, thank God! This trouble o' Francie's has threw me all out in more ways than one. If everything had 'a' went as I'd expected, I'd been workin' at the Shermans' straight along these days, an' you wouldn't 'a' had a mite o' trouble with the little fella. Him an' I understands each other perfeckly, an' with me a loomin' up on the landscape, he kinder sees the sense o' walkin' a chalk-line, not kickin' up his heels too frisky. I'd calculated on being there, to sorter back you up, till you'd got uster the place, an' made 'em understand you mean business."

Claire laughed, a quick, sharp little laugh.

"O, I think I'm gradually making them understand I mean business," she said. "And I'm sure it is better, since I have to be there at all, that I should be there without you, independent of any help. I couldn't make Radcliffe respect my authority, if I depended on some one else to enforce it. It's just one of those cases where one has to fight one's own battle alone."

"Then it *is* a battle?" Martha inquired quietly.

"O, it's a battle, 'all right,'" laughed Claire mirthlessly, and before Mrs. Slawson could probe her further, she managed to make her escape.

She did not wish to burden Martha with her vexations. Martha had troubles of her own. Moreover, those that were most worrisome to Claire, Martha, in the very nature of things, would not understand.

Claire's first few weeks at the Shermans' had been uneventful enough. Radcliffe had found amusement in the novelty of the situation, had deigned to play school with her, and permitted her to "make believe" she was "the teacher." He was willing to "pretend" to be her "scholar," just as he would have been willing to pretend to be the horse, if he and another boy had been playing, and the other boy had chosen to be driver for a while. But turn about is fair play,

and when the days passed, and Claire showed no sign of relinquishing her claim, he grew restless, mutinous, and she had all she could do to keep him in order.

Gradually it began to dawn upon him that this very little person, kind and companionable as she seemed, suffered under the delusion that he was going to obey her—that, somehow, she was going to constrain him to obey her. Of course, this was the sheerest nonsense. How could she make him do anything he didn't want to do, since his mother had told her, in his presence, that he was to be governed by love alone, and, fortunately, her lack of superior size and strength forbade her *love* from expressing itself as, he shudderingly remembered, Martha's had done on one occasion. No, plainly he had the advantage of Miss Lang, but until she clearly understood it, there were apt to be annoyances. So, without taking the trouble to make the punishment fit the crime, he casually locked her in the sitting-room closet one morning. She had stepped inside to hang up her hat and coat as usual, and it was quite easy, swiftly, noiselessly, to close the door upon her, and turn the key.

He paused a moment, choking back his nervous laughter, waiting to hear her bang on the panel, and clamor to be let out. But when she made no outcry, when, beyond one or two futile turnings

of the knob, there was no further attempt on her part to free herself, he stole upstairs to the schoolroom, and made merry over his clever exploit.

For a full minute after she found herself in darkness, Claire did not realize she was a prisoner. The door had swung to after her, she thought, that was all. But, when she turned the knob, and still it did not open, she began to suspect the truth. Her first impulse was to call out, but her better judgment told her it would be better to wait with what dignity she might until Radcliffe tired of his trick, or some one else came and released her. Radcliffe would tire the more quickly, she reasoned, if she did not raise a disturbance. When he saw she was not to be teased, he would come and let her out. She stood with her hot cheek pressed against the cool wood of the closet-door, waiting for him to come. And listening for his steps, she heard other steps—other steps which approached, and entered the sitting-room. She heard the voices of Mrs. Sherman and Mr. Ronald in earnest conversation.

"If I thought such a thing were possible I'd send her away to-morrow," Mrs. Sherman was saying in a high-pitched, excited voice.

"Why such delay? Why not to-day?" inquired Mr. Ronald ironically.

"But, of course," continued his sister, ignoring his interruption, "I know there's nothing to be really afraid of."

"Well, then, if you know there's nothing to be afraid of, what *are* you afraid of?"

"I'm not really afraid. I'm just talking things over. You see, she's so uncommonly pretty, and—men are men, and you're no exception."

"I hope not. I don't want to be an exception."

"Don't you think she's uncommonly pretty?"

"No, I don't think I should call her—*pretty,*" said Mr. Ronald with an emphasis his sister might well have challenged, if she had not been so preoccupied with her own thoughts that she missed its point.

"Well, *I* do. I think she's quite pretty enough to excuse, I mean, *explain* your having a passing fancy for her."

"I haven't a passing fancy for her."

"Well, I'm much relieved to hear you say so, for even if it were only a passing fancy, I'd feel I ought to send her away. You never can tell how such things will develop."

"You certainly can't."

"And you may rest assured mother and I don't want you to ruin your life by throwing yourself away on a penniless, unknown little gov-

erness, when you might have your choice from among the best-born, wealthiest girls in town."

"Miss Lang is as well-born as any one we know."

"We have only her word for it."

"No, her nurse, an old family servant, Martha Slawson, corroborates her—if you require corroboration."

"Don't you? Would you be satisfied to pick some one off the street, as it were, and take her into your house and give her your innocent child to train?"

"My innocent children being so extremely vague, I am not concerning myself as to their education. But I certainly accept Miss Lang's word, and I accept Martha's."

"You're easily satisfied. Positively, Frank, I believe you *have* a fancy for the girl, in spite of what you say. And for all our sakes, for mother's and mine and yours and—yes—even hers, it will be best for me to tell her to go."

"I rather like the way you rank us. Mother and you first—then I come, and last—*even* the poor little girl!"

"Well, you may laugh if you want to, but when a child like Radcliffe notices that you're not indifferent to her, there must be some truth in it. He confided to me last night, 'Uncle Frank likes

Miss Lang a lot. I guess she's his best girl! Isn't she his best girl?' I told him *certainly not.* But I lay awake most of the night, worrying about it."

Mr. Ronald had evidently had enough of the interview. Claire could hear his firm steps, as he strode across the floor to the door.

"I advise you to quit worrying, Catherine," he said. "It doesn't pay. Moreover, I assure you I've no *passing fancy* (I quote your words) for Miss Lang. I hope you won't be so foolish as to dismiss her on my account. She's an excellent teacher, a good disciplinarian. It would be difficult to find another as capable as she, one who, at the same time, would put up with Radcliffe's waywardness, and your—*our*—(I'll put it picturesquely, after the manner of Martha) our indiosincrazies. Take my advice. Don't part with Miss Lang. She's the right person in the right place. Good-morning!"

"Frank, Frank! Don't leave me like that. I know I've terribly annoyed you. I can't bear to feel you're provoked with me, and yet I'm only acting for your good. Please kiss me good-by. I'm going away. I won't see you for two whole days. I'm going to Tuxedo this morning to stay over night with Amy Pelham. There's a man she's terribly interested in, and she wants me to meet him, and tell her what I think of him. He's

been attentive to her for ever so long, and yet he doesn't—his name is Mr. Robert——" Her words frayed off in the distance, as she hurriedly followed her brother out into the hall and downstairs.

How long Claire stood huddled against the closet-door she never knew. The first thing of which she was clearly conscious was the feel of a key stealthily moved in the lock beneath her hand. Then the sounds of footsteps lightly tiptoeing away. Mechanically she turned the knob, the door yielded, and she staggered blindly out from the darkness into the sunlit room. It was deserted.

If Mrs. Sherman had been there, Claire would have given way at once, letting her sense of outraged pride escape her in a torrent of tears, a storm of indignant protest. Happily, there being no one to cry to, she had time to gather herself together before going up to face Radcliffe. When she entered the schoolroom, he pretended to be studiously busied with his books, and so did not notice that she was rather a long time closing the door after her, and that she also had business with the lock of the door opposite. He really only looked up when she stationed herself behind her desk, and summoned him to recite.

"I do' want to!" announced Radcliffe resolutely.

"Very well," said Claire, "then we'll sit here until you do."

Radcliffe grinned. It seemed to him things were all going his way, this clear, sunny morning. He began to whistle, in a breathy undertone.

Claire made no protest. She simply sat and waited.

Radcliffe took up his pencil, and began scrawling pictures over both sides of his slate, exulting in the squeaking sounds he produced. Still *the teacher* did not interfere. But when, tired of his scratching, he concluded the time had arrived for his grand demonstration, his crowning declaration of independence, he rose, carelessly shoved his books aside, strode to the door, intending masterfully to leave the room, and—discovered he was securely locked and bolted in. In a flash he was across the room, tearing at the lock of the second door with frantic fingers. That, too, had been made fast. He turned upon Claire like a little fiend, his eyes flashing, his hands clenched.

"You — you — you two-cent Willie!" he screamed.

Claire pretended not to see or hear. In reality she was acutely conscious of every move he made, for, small as he was, his pent-in rage gave him a strength she might well fear to put to

the test. It was the tug of war. The question was, who would be conqueror?

Through the short hours of the winter forenoon, hours that seemed as interminable to Claire as they did to Radcliffe, the battle raged. There was no sign of capitulation on either side.

In the course of the morning, and during one of Radcliffe's fiercest outbreaks, Claire took up the telephone instrument and quietly instructed Shaw to bring no luncheon-trays to the school-room at mid-day.

"Two glasses of hot milk will be all we need," she said, whereupon Radcliffe leaped upon her, trying to wrest the transmitter from her hand, beating her with his hard little fists.

"I won't drink milk! I won't! I won't!" he shouted madly. "An' I'll *kill* you, if you won't let me have my lunch, you—you—you *mizzer'ble* two-cent Willie!"

As the day drew on, his white face grew flushed, her fevered one white, and both were haggard and lined from the struggle. Then, at about three o'clock, Mr. Ronald telephoned up to say he wished Radcliffe to go for a drive with him.

Claire replied it was impossible.

"Why?" came back to her over the wire.

"Because he needs punishment, and I am going to see that he gets it."

"And if I interfere?"

"I resign at once. Even as it is——"

"Do you think you are strong enough—strong enough *physically,* to fight to the finish?"

"I am strong enough for anything."

"I believe you. But if you should find him one too many for you, I shall be close at hand, and at a word from you I will come to the rescue."

"No fear of my needing help. Good-by!"

She hung up the receiver with a click of finality.

Outside, the sky grew gray and threatening. Inside, the evening shadows began to gather. First they thickened in the corners of the room; then spread and spread until the whole place turned vague and dusky.

The first violence of his rage was spent, but Radcliffe, sullen and unconquered still, kept up the conflict in silent rebellion. He had not drunk his milk, so neither had Claire hers. The two glasses stood untouched upon her desk, where she had placed them at noon. It was so still in the room Claire would have thought the boy had fallen asleep, worn out with his struggles, but for the quick, catching breaths that, like soundless sobs, escaped him every now and then. It had been dark a long, long time when, suddenly, a shaft of light from a just lit window opposite, struck over across to them, reflecting into the

shadow, and making visible Radcliffe's little figure cowering back in the shelter of a huge leather armchair. He looked so pitifully small and appealing, that Claire longed to gather him up in her arms, but she forebore and sat still and waited.

Then, at last, just as the clock of a nearby church most solemnly boomed forth eight reverberating strokes, a chastened little figure slid out of the great chair, and groped its way slowly, painfully along until it reached Claire's side.

"I will—be—good!" Radcliffe whispered chokingly, so low she had to bend her head to hear.

Claire laid her arms about him and he clung to her neck, trembling.

CHAPTER XI

IT was almost ten o'clock when Claire left the house. She waited to see Radcliffe properly fed, and put to bed, before she went. She covered him up, and tucked him in as, in all his life, he had never been covered up, and tucked in, before. Then, dinnerless and faint, she slipped out into the bleak night.

She was too exhausted to feel triumphant over her conquest. The only sensations she realized were a dead weariness that hung on her spirit and body like a palpable weight, and, far down in her heart, something that smouldered and burned like a live ember, ready to burst forth and blaze at a touch.

She had walked but a block or two when, through her numbness, crept a dim little shadow of dread. At first it was nothing more than an inner suggestion to hasten her steps, but gradually it became a conscious impulse to outstrip something or some one behind her—some one or something whose footfalls, resounding faintly through the deserted street, kept such accurate pace with her own, that they sounded like their echo.

It was not until she had quickened her steps, and found that the other's steps had quickened, too, not until she had slowed down to almost a saunter, only to discover that the one behind was lagging also, that she acknowledged to herself she was being followed.

Then, from out the far reaches of her memory, came the words of Aunt Amelia's formula: "Sir, you are no gentleman. If you were a gentleman——" But straightway followed Martha's trenchant criticism.

"Believe *me,* that's rot! It might go all right on the stage, for a girl to stop, an' let off some elercution while the villain still pursued her, but here in New York City it wouldn't work. Not on your life it wouldn't. Villains ain't pausin' these busy days, in their mad careers, for no recitation-stunts, I don't care how genteel you get 'em off. If they're on the job, you got to step lively, an' not linger 'round for no sweet farewells. Now, you got your little temper with you, all right, all right! If you also got a umbrella, why, just you make a *com*bine o' the two an'—aim for the bull's eye, though his nose will do just as good, specially if it's the bleedin' v'riety. No! P'licemen ain't what I'd reckmend, for bein' called to the resquer. In the first place, they ain't ap' to be there. An', besides, they wouldn't know what to do if they was. P'licemen is funny that way.

They mean well, but they get upset if anythin' 's doin' on their beat. They like things quiet. An' they don't like to *run in* their friends, an' so, by the time you think you made 'em understand what you're drivin' at, *the villain* has got away, an' you're like to be hauled up before the magistrate for disturbin' the peace, which, bein' so shy an' bashful before high officials, p'licemen don't like to blow in at court without somethin' to show for the way they been workin'."

It all flashed across Claire's mind in an instant, like a picture thrown across a screen. Then, without pausing to consider what she meant to do, she halted, turned, and—was face to face with Francis Ronald.

Before he could speak, she flashed upon him two angry eyes.

"What do you mean by following me?"

"It is late—too late for you to be out in the streets alone," he answered quietly.

Claire laughed. "You forget I'm not a society girl. I'm a girl who works for her living. I can't carry a chaperon about with me wherever I go. I must take care of myself, and—I know how to do it. I'm not afraid."

"I believe you."

"Then—good-night!"

"I intend to see you home."

"I don't need you."

"Nevertheless, I intend to see you home."

"I don't—*want* you."

"Notwithstanding which——"

He hailed a passing motor-taxi, gave the chauffeur Martha's street and number, after he had succeeded in extracting them from Claire, and then, in spite of protests, helped her in.

For a long time she sat beside him in silence, trying to quell in herself a weak inclination to shed tears, because—because he had compelled her to do something against her will.

He did not attempt any conversation, and when, at last, she spoke, it was of her own accord.

"I've decided to resign my position."

"Is it permitted me to know why?"

"I can't stay."

"That is no explanation."

"I don't feel I can manage Radcliffe."

"Pardon me, you know you can. You have proved it. He is your bond-slave, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer."

Claire laughed, a sharp, cutting little laugh that was like a keen knife turned on herself.

"O, it would have to be for poorer—'all right, all right,' as Martha says," she cried scornfully. "But it has been too hard—to-day. I can't endure any more."

"You won't have to. Radcliffe is conquered,

so far as you are concerned. 'Twill be plain sailing, after this."

"I'd rather do something else. I'd like something different."

"I did not think you were a quitter."

"I'm not."

"O, yes, you are, if you give up before the game is done. No good sport does that."

"I've no ambition to be a good sport."

"Perhaps not. But you *are* a good sport. A thorough good sport. *And you won't give up till you've seen this thing through.*"

"Is that a prediction, or a—command? It sounds like a command."

"It is whatever will hold you to the business you've undertaken. I want you to conquer the rest, as you've conquered Radcliffe."

"The rest?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean by the rest?"

"I mean circumstances. I mean obstacles. I mean, my mother—my sister."

"I don't—understand."

"Perhaps not."

"And suppose (forgive me if I seem rude), suppose I don't consider *the rest* worth conquering? Why should I? What one has to strive so for——"

"Is worth the most. One has to strive for

everything in this world, everything that is really worth while. One has to strive to get it, one has to strive to keep it."

"Well, I don't think I care very much to-night, if I never get anything ever again in all my life to come."

"Poor little tired girl!"

Claire's chin went up with a jerk. "I don't need your pity, I won't have it. I am a stranger to you and to your friends. I am——" The defiant chin began to quiver.

"If you were not so tired," Francis Ronald said gravely, "I'd have this thing out with you, here and now. I'd *make* you tell me why you so wilfully misunderstand. Why you seem to take pleasure in saying things that are meant to hurt me, and must hurt you. As it is——"

Claire turned on him impetuously. "I don't ask you to make allowances for me. If I do what displeases you, I give you perfect liberty to find fault. I'm not too tired to listen. But as to your *making* me do or say anything I don't choose, why——"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid you are a hopeless proposition, at least for the present. Perhaps, some time I may be able to make you understand—— Forgive me! I should say, perhaps, some time you may be willing to understand."

Their chauffeur drew up beside the curbstone in front of Martha's door, then sprang down from his seat to prove to his lordly-looking "fare" that he knew his business, and was deserving of as large a tip as a correct estimate of his merit might suggest.

Francis Ronald took Claire's key from her, fitted it into the lock of the outer door, and opened it for her.

"And you will stand by Radcliffe? You won't desert him?" he asked, as she was about to pass into the house.

"I'll show you that, at least, I'm not a quitter, even if I *am* a hopeless proposition, as you say."

A faint shadow of a smile flitted across his face as, with head held proudly erect, she turned and left him.

"No, you're not a quitter," he muttered to himself, "but—neither am I!"

The determined set of his jaw would have rekindled that inner rebellious fire in Claire, if she had seen it. But she was seeing nothing just at that moment, save Martha, who, to her amazement, stood ready to receive her in the inner hall.

"Ain't it just grand?" inquired Mrs. Slawson. "They told me yesterday, 'all things bein' equal,' they'd maybe leave us back soon, but I didn't put no stock in it, knowin' they never *is* equal. So I just held me tongue an' waited, an' this mornin',

like a bolster outer a blue sky, come the word that at noon we could go. Believe *me,* I didn't wait for no old shoes or rice to be threw after me. I got into their old amberlance-carriage, as happy as a blushin' bride bein' led to the halter, an' Francie an' me come away reji'cin'. Say, but what ails *you?* You look sorter—sorter like a—strained relation or somethin'. What you been doin' to yourself to get so white an' holler-eyed? What kep' you so late?"

"I had a tussle with Radcliffe."

"Who won out?"

"I did, but it took me all day."

"Never mind. It'd been cheap at the price, if it had 'a' took you all week. How come the madam to give you a free hand?"

"She was away."

"Anybody else know what was goin' on? Any of the fam'ly?"

"Yes, Mr. Ronald. He brought me home. I didn't want him to, but he did. He just *made* me let him, and—O, Martha—I can't bear—I can't bear——"

"You mean you can't bear *him?*"

Claire nodded, choking back her tears.

"Now, what do you think o' that!" ejaculated Mrs. Slawson pensively. "An' he so *pop'lar* with the ladies! Why, you'd oughter hear them stylish lady-friends o' Mrs. Sherman praisin' 'm

to her face. It'd make you blush for their modesty, which they don't seem to have none, an' that's a fac'. You can take it from me, you're the only one he ever come in contract with, has such a hate on'm. I wouldn't 'a' believed it, unless I'd 'a' had it from off of your own lips. But there's no use tryin' to argue such things. Taste is different. What pleases one, pizens another. In the mean time—an' it *is* a mean time for you, you poor, wore-out child—I've some things here, hot an' tasty, that'll encourage your stummick, no matter how it's turned on some other things. As I says to Sammy, it's a poor stummick won't warm its own bit, but all the same, there's times when somethin' steamin' does your heart as much good as it does your stummick, which, the two o' them bein' such near neighbors, no wonder we get 'em mixed up sometimes, an' think the one is starved when it's only the other."

CHAPTER XII

IT proved altogether easier for Martha, now Francie was at home again.

"You see, I can tend her an' sandwich in some work besides," Mrs. Slawson explained cheerfully. "An' Ma's a whizz at settin' by bedsides helpin' patients get up their appetites. Says she, 'Now drink this nice glass o' egg-nog, Francie, me child,' she says. 'An' if you'll drink it, I'll take one just like it meself.' An' true for you, she does. The goodness o' Ma is astonishin'."

Then one day Sam Slawson came home with a tragic face.

"I've lost my job, Martha!" he stated baldly.

For a moment his wife stood silent under the blow, and all it entailed. Then, with an almost imperceptible squaring of her broad shoulders, she braced herself to meet it, as she herself would say, like a soldier. "Well, it's kinder hard on *you,* lad," she answered. "But there's no use grievin'. If it had to happen, it couldn't 'a' happened at a better time, for you bein' home, an' able to look after Francie, will give me a chance to go out reg'lar to my work again. An' before

you know it, Francie, she'll be running about as good as new, an' you'll have another job, an' we'll be on the top o' the wave. Here's Miss Claire, bless her, payin' me seven dollars a week board, which she doesn't eat no more than a bird, an' Sammy singin' in the surplus choir, an' gettin' fifty cents a week for it, an' extra for funer'ls (it'd take your time to hear'm lamentin' because business ain't brisker in the funer'l line!). Why, *we* ain't no call to be discouraged. You can take it from me, Sammy Slawson, when things seem to be kinder shuttin' down on ye, an' gettin' black-like, same's they lately been doin' on us, that ain't no time to be chicken-hearted. Anybody could fall down when they're knocked. That's too dead-easy! No, what we want, is buck up an' have some style about us. When things shuts down an' gets dark at the movin'-picture show, then it's time to sit up an' take notice. That means somethin's doin'—you're goin' to be showed somethin' interestin'. Well, it's the same with us. But if you lose your sand at the first go-off, an' sag down an' hide your face in your hands, well, you'll miss the show. You won't see a bloomin' thing."

And Martha, sleeves rolled up, enveloped in an enormous blue-checked apron, returned to her assault on the dough she was kneading, with redoubled zeal.

"Bread, mother?" asked Sam dully, letting himself down wearily into a chair by the drop-table, staring indifferently before him out of blank eyes.

"Shoor! An' I put some currants in, to please the little fella. I give in, my bread is what you might call a holy terror. Ain't it the caution how I can't ever make bread fit to be eat, the best I can do? An' yet, I can't quit tryin'. You see, home-made bread, *if it's good,* is cheaper than store. Perhaps some day I'll be hittin' it right, so's when you ask me for bread I won't be givin' you a stone."

She broke off abruptly, gazed a moment at her husband, then stepped to his side, and put a floury hand on his shoulder. "Say, Sam, what you lookin' so for? You ain't lost your sand just because they fired you? What's come to you, lad? Tell Martha."

For a second there was no sound in the room, then the man looked up, gulped, choked down a mighty sob, and laid his head against her breast.

"Martha—there's somethin' wrong with my lung. That's why they thrown me down. They had their doctor from the main office examine me—they'd noticed me coughin'—and he said I'd a spot on my lung or—something. I shouldn't stay here in the city, he said. I must go up in the mountains, away from this, where there's the

good air and a chance for my lung to heal, otherwise——"

Martha stroked the damp hair away from his temples with her powdery hand.

"Well, well!" she said reflectively. "Now, what do you think o' that!"

"O, Martha—I can't stand it! You an' the children! It's more than I can bear!"

Mrs. Slawson gave the head against her breast a final pat that, to another than her husband, might have felt like a blow.

"More'n you can bear? Don't flatter yourself, Sammy my lad! Not by no means it ain't. I wouldn't like to have to stand up to all I could ackchelly bear. It's God, not us, knows how much we can stand, an' when He gets in the good licks on us, He always leaves us with a little stren'th to spare—to last over for the next time. Now, I'm not a bit broke down by what you've told me. I s'pose you thought you'd have me sobbin' on your shoulder—to give you a chanct to play up, an' do the strong-husband act, comfortin' his little tremblin' wife. Well, my lad, if you ain't got on to it by now, that I'm no little, tremblin' wife, you never will. Those kind has nerves. I only got nerve. That's where I'm *singular,* see? A joke, Sammy! I made it up myself. Out of my own head, just now. But to go back to what I was sayin'—why should I sob

on your shoulder? There ain't no reason for't. In the first place, even if you *have* got a spot on your lung, what's a spot! It ain't the whole lung! An' *one* lung ain't *both* lungs, an' there you are! As I make it out, even grantin' the worst, you're a lung-an'-then-some to the good, so where's the use gettin' blue? There's always a way out, somehow. If we can't do one way, we'll do another. Now you just cheer up, an' don't let Ma an' the childern see you kinder got a knock-outer in the solar plexus, like Jeffries, an' before you know it, there'll be a suddent turn, an' we'll be atop o' our worries, 'stead o' their bein' atop o' us. See! Say, just you cast your eye on them loaves! Ain't they grand? Appearances may be deceitful, but if I do say it as shouldn't, my bread certainly looks elegant this time. Now, Sammy, get busy like a good fella! Go in an' amuse Francie. The poor child is perishin' for somethin' to distrack her. What with Cora an' Sammy at school, an' Miss Claire havin' the Shermans so bewitched, they keep her there all day, an' lucky for us if they leave her come home nights at all, the house is too still for a sick person. Give Francie a drink o' Hygee water to cool her lips, an' tell her a yarn-like. An', Sammy, I wisht you'd be good to yourself, an' have a shave. Them prickles o' beard reminds me o' the insides o' Mrs. Sherman's big music-

box. I wonder what tune you'd play if I run your chin in. Go on, now, an' attend to Francie, like I told you to. She needs to have her mind took off'n herself."

When he was gone, Martha set her loaves aside under cover to rise, never pausing a moment to take breath, before giving the kitchen a "scrub-down" that left no corner or cranny harboring a particle of dust. It was twilight when she finished, and "time to turn to an' get the dinner."

Cora and Sammy had long since returned from school. Sammy had gone out again to play, and had just come back to find his mother taking her bread-pans from the oven. She regarded them with doleful gaze.

"I fairly broke my own record this time for a bum bread-maker!" she muttered beneath her breath. "This batch is the worst yet."

"Say—mother!" said Sammy.

"Well?"

"Say, mother, may I have a slice of bread? I'm awfully hungry."

"Shoor you may! This here's just fresh from the oven, an' it has currants in it."

"Say, mother, a feller I play with, Joe Eagan, *his* mother's hands ain't clean. Would you think he'd like to eat the bread she makes?"

"Can she make *good* bread?"

"I dunno. She give me a piece oncet, but I

couldn't eat it, 'count o' seein' her fingers. I'm glad your hands are so clean, mother. Say, this bread tastes awful good!"

Martha chuckled. "Well, I'm glad you like it. It might be worse, if I do say it! Only," she added to herself, "it'd have a tough time managin' it."

"Say, mother, may I have another slice with butter on, an' sugar sprinkled on top, like this is, to give it to Joe Eagan? He's downstairs. I want to show him how *my* mother can make the boss bread!"

"Certainly," said Martha heartily. "By all means, give Joe Eagan a slice. I like to see you thoughtful an' generous, my son. Willin' to share your good things with your friends," and as Sammy bounded out, clutching his treasures, she winked solemnly across at her husband, who had just re-entered.

"Now do you know what'll happen?" she inquired. "Sammy'll always have the notion I make the best bread ever. An' when he grows up an' marries, if his wife is a chef-cook straight out of the toniest kitchen in town, at fifty dollars a month, he'll tell her she ain't a patch on me. An' he'll say to her: 'Susan, or whatever-her-name-is, them biscuits is all right in their way, but I wisht I had a mouthful o' bread like mother used to make.' An' the poor creature'll wear the life out

o' her, tryin' to please'm, an' reach my top-notch, an' never succeed, an' all the time—— Say, Sammy, gather up the rest o' the stuff, like a good fella, an' shove it onto the dumb-waiter, so's it can go down with the sw—— There's the whistle now! That's him callin' for the garbage."

CHAPTER XIII

"HULLO, Martha!" said Radcliffe.

Mrs. Slawson bowed profoundly. "Hullo yourself! I ain't had the pleasure of meetin' you for quite some time past, an' yet I notice my absents ain't made no serious alteration for the worst in your appearance. You ain't fell away none, on account of my not bein' here."

"Fell away from what?" asked Radcliffe.

"Fell away from nothin'. That's what they call a figger o' speech. Means you ain't got thin."

"Well, *you've* got thin, haven't you, Martha? I don't 'member your cheeks had those two long lines in 'em before."

"Lines?" repeated Martha, regarding herself in the mirror of an étagère she was polishing. "Them ain't *lines*. Them's dimples."

Radcliffe scrutinized her critically for a moment. "They're not like Miss Lang's dimples," he observed at last. "Miss Lang's dimples look like when you blow in your milk to cool it—they're there, an' then they ain't there. She vanishes

'em in, an' she vanishes 'em out, but those lines in your face, they just stay. Only they weren't there before, when you were here."

"The secret is, my dimples is the kind that takes longer to vanish 'em out when you once vanished 'em in. Mine's way-train dimples. Miss Lang's is express. But you can take it from me, dimples is faskinatin', whatever specie they are."

"What's *faskinatin'?*"

"It's the thing in some things that, when it ain't in other things, you don't care a thing about 'em."

"Are *you* faskinatin'?"

"That's not for me to say," said Martha, feigning coyness. "But this much I will confess, that some folks which shall be nameless, considers me so. An' they'd oughter know."

"Is Miss Lang faskinatin'?"

"Ask your Uncle Frank."

"Why must I ask him?"

"If you wanter know."

"Does he know?"

"Prob'ly. He's a very well-informed gen'l' man on most subjecks."

"I do' want to ask my Uncle Frank anything about Miss Lang. Once I asked him somethin' about her, an' he didn't like it."

"What'd you ask him?"

"I asked him if she wasn't his best girl."

"What'd he say?"

"He said 'No!' quick, just like that—'No!' I guess he was cross with me, an' I know he didn't like it. When I asked my mother why he didn't like it, she said because Miss Lang's only my governess. An' when I told Miss Lang what my mother, she told me, Miss Lang, she didn't like it either."

"Now, what do you think o' that?" ejaculated Martha. "Nobody didn't seem to like nothin' in that combination, did they? You was the only one in the whole outfit that showed any tack."

"What means that—*tack?*"

"It's a little thing that you use when you want to keep things in place—keep 'em from fallin' down. There's two kinds. One you must hammer in, an' the other you mustn't."

"I wisht Miss Lang *was* my Uncle Frank's best girl. But I guess she's somebody else's."

"Eh?" said Martha sharply, sitting back on her heels and twisting her polishing-cloth into a rope, as if she were wringing it out. "Now, whose best girl do you think she is, if I may make so bold?"

Radcliffe settled down to business.

"Yesterday Miss Lang an' me was comin' home from the Tippydrome, an' my mother she

had comp'ny in the drawin'-room. An' I didn't know there was comp'ny first-off, coz Shaw he didn't tell us, an' I guess I talked kinder loud in the hall, an' my mother she heard me, an' she wasn't cross or anythin', she just called to me to come along in, an' see the comp'ny. An' I said, 'No, I won't! Not less Miss Lang comes too.' An' my mother, she said, 'Miss Lang, come too.' An' Miss Lang, she didn't wanter, but she hadter. An' the comp'ny was a gen'l'man an' a lady, an' the minit the gen'l'man, he saw Miss Lang, he jumped up outer his chair like a jumpin'-jack, an' his eyes got all kinder sparkly, an' he held out both of his hands to her, an' sorter shook her hands, till you'd think he'd shake 'em off. An' my mother, she said, 'I see you an' Miss Lang are already 'quainted, Mr. Van Brandt.' An' he laughed a lot, the way you do when you're just tickled to death, an' he said, ''Quainted? Well, I should say so! Miss Lang an' I are old, old friends!' An' he kep' lookin' at her, an' lookin' at her, the way you feel when there's somethin' on the table you like, an' you're fearful 'fraid it will be gone before it's passed to you. An' my mother she said to the other comp'ny, 'Miss Pelham, this is Radcliffe.' An' Miss Pelham, she was lookin' sideways at Miss Lang an' Mr. What's-his-name, but she pertended she was lookin' at me, an' she said (she's a Smarty-Smarty-gave-

a-party, Miss Pelham is), she said, 'Radcliffe, Radcliffe? I wonder if you're any relation to Radcliffe College?' An' I said, 'No. I wonder if you are any relation to Pelham Manor?' An' while they was laughin', an' my mother she was tellin' how percoshus I am, my Uncle Frank he came in. He came in kinder quiet, like he always does, an' he stood in the door, an' Mr. What's-his-name was talkin' to Miss Lang so fast, an' lookin' at her so hard, they didn't neither of 'em notice. An' when my Uncle Frank, he noticed they didn't notice, coz they was havin' such fun by themselves, he put his mouth together like this—like when your tooth hurts, an' you bite on it to make it hurt some more, an' then he talked a lot to Miss Pelham, an' didn't smile pleasant an' happy at Mr. What's-his-name an' Miss Lang, when my mother, she interdooced 'em. An' soon Miss Lang, she took me upstairs an' she didn't look near so tickled to death as Mr. Van Brandt, he looked. An' when I asked her if she wasn't, she said: 'O' course I am. Mr. Van Brandt was a friend o' mine when I was a little girl. An' when you're a stranger in a strange land, anybody you knew when you was at home seems dear to you.' But she didn't look near so pleased as he did. She looked more like my Uncle Frank, he did before he got talkin' so much to Miss Pelham. An' now I guess the way of it is, Miss

Pelham's my Uncle Frank's best girl an' Miss Lang's Mr. What's-his-name's."

"Well, now! Who'd believed you could 'a' seen so much? Why, you're a reg'ler Old Sleuth the Detective, or Sherlock Holmes, or somebody like that, for discoverin' things, ain't you?"

"I don't want Miss Pelham to be my Uncle Frank's best girl, an' I don't see why that other man he don't have her for his, like she was first-off, an' leave my Miss Lang alone."

"It all is certainly very dark an' mysterious," said Mrs. Slawson, shaking her head. "You don't know where you're at, at all. Like when you wake up in the black night, an' hear the clock give one strike. You couldn't tell, if your life hung in the ballast, if it's half-past twelve, or one, or half-past."

Radcliffe pondered this for a space, but was evidently unable to fathom its depth, for presently he let it go with a sigh, and swung off to another topic.

"Say, do you know our cook, 'Liza—the one we uster have—has gone away?"

"So I gathered from not havin' saw her fairy-figger hoverin' round the kitchen as I come in, an' meetin' another lady in her place—name of Augusta, Beetrice said."

"Yes, sir! Augusta's the new one. I guess Augusta don't drink."

"Which, you are suggestin', 'Liza does?"

"Well, my mother, she don't know I know, but I do. I heard Shaw tellin' 'bout it. It was 'Liza's day out, an' she went an' got 'toxicated, an' a p'liceman he took her up, an' nex' mornin' my Uncle Frank, they sent to him out of the station-house to have him *bail her out.*"

"My, my! She was as full as that?"

"What's bail her out?" inquired Radcliffe.

Mrs. Slawson considered. "When a boat gets full of water, because o' leakin' sides or heavy rains or shippin' seas, or whatever they calls it, you bail her out with a tin can or a sponge or anythin' you have by you."

"Was 'Liza full of water?"

"I was describin' *boats,*" said Martha. "An' talkin' o' boats, did I tell you we got a new kitten to our house? He's a gray Maltee. His name is Nixcomeraus."

"Why is his name Nix—why is his name *that?*"

"Nixcomeraus? His name's Nixcomeraus because he's from the Dutchman's house. If you listen good, you'll see that's poetry—

"'Nixcomeraus from the Dutchman's house!'

"I didn't make it up, but it's poetry all the same. A Dutchman gen'l'man who lives nex' door to me, made him a present to our fam'ly."

"Do you like him?"

"The Dutchman gen'l'man?"

"No, the—the Nix—the *cat?*"

"Certaintly we like him. He's a decent, self-respectin' little fella that 'tends to his own business, an' keeps good hours. An' you'd oughter see how grand him an' Flicker gets along! Talk o' a cat-and-dog existence! Why, if all the married parties I know, not to speak o' some others that ain't, hit it off as good as Flicker an' Nixcomeraus, there wouldn't be no occasion for so many ladies takin' the rest-cure at Reno."

"What's Reno?"

"Reno? Why, Reno's short for merino. Like I'd say, Nix for Nixcomeraus, which is a kinder woolen goods you make dresses out of. There! Did you hear the schoolroom bell? I thought I heard it ringin' a while ago, but I wasn't sure. Hurry now, an' don't keep Miss Lang waitin'. She wants you to come straight along up, so's she can learn you to be a big an' handsome gen'l'man like your Uncle Frank."

When Radcliffe had left her, Martha went over in her mind the items he had guilelessly contributed to her general fund of information. Take it all in all, she was not displeased with what they seemed to indicate.

"Confidence is a good thing to have, but a little wholesome doubt don't hurt the masculine gender

none. I guess, if I was put to it, I could count on one hand with no fingers, the number o' gen'l'-men, no matter how plain, have died because 'way down in their hearts they believed they wasn't reel *A-1 Winners*. That's one thing it takes a lot o' hard usage to convince the sect of. They may feel they ain't gettin' their doos, that they're misunderstood, an' bein' sold below cost. But that they're ackchelly shopworn, or what's called 'seconds,' or put on the *As Is* counter because they're cracked, or broke, or otherwise slightly disfigured, but still in the ring—why, *that* never seems to percolate through their brains, like those coffee-pots they use nowadays, that don't make no better coffee than the old kind, if you know how to do it good, in the first place.

"On the other hand, ladies is dretful tryin'! They act like they're the discoverers of perpetchal emotion, an' is *on the job* demonstratin'. You can't count on 'em for one minit to the next, which they certaintly was never born to be aromatic cash-registers. An' p'raps that's the reason, bein' natchelly so poor at figgers, they got to rely to such a extent on corsets. I'm all for women myself. I believe they're the comin' man, but I must confess, if I'm to speak the truth, it ain't for the simple, uninfected, childlike mind o' the male persuasion to foller their figaries, unless he's some of a trained acrobat.

"Now, the harsh way Miss Claire has toward Mr. Ronald! You'd think he had give himself dead away to her, an' was down on his knee-pans humble as a 'Piscerpalian sayin' the Literny in Lent, grubbin' about among the dust she treads on, to touch the hem o' her garment. Whereas, in some way unbeknownst to me, an' prob'ly unbeknownst to him, he's touched her pride, which is why she's so up in arms, not meanin' his—worse luck! An' it would have all worked out right in the end, an' will yet, *if* this new party that Radcliffe mentioned ain't Mr. Buttinsky, an' she don't foller the dictates of her *art* an' flirt with him too outrageous, or else marry him to spite herself, which is what I mean to pervent if I can, but which, of course, it may be I can't."

CHAPTER XIV

"FRANK," said Mrs. Sherman one Sunday morning, some weeks later, stopping her brother on his way to the door, "can you spare me a few moments? I've something very important I want to discuss with you. I want you to help me with suggestions and advice in a matter that very closely concerns some one in whom I'm greatly interested."

Mr. Ronald paused. "Meaning?" he suggested.

"I don't know that I ought to tell you. You see, it's—it's confidential."

"Suggestions and advice are foolish things to give, Catherine. They are seldom taken, never thanked for."

"Well, in this case mine have been actually solicited. And I feel I ought to do something, because, in a way, I'm more or less responsible for the—the imbroglio."

Slipping her hand through his arm, she led him back into the library.

"You see, it's this way. Perhaps, after all, it will be better, simpler, if I don't try to beat about the bush. Amy Pelham has been terribly

devoted to Mr. Van Brandt for ever so long—oh, quite six months. And he has been rather attentive, though I can't say he struck me as very much in love. You know she asked me out to Tuxedo not long ago. She wanted me to watch him and tell her if I thought he was *serious*. Well, I watched him, but I couldn't say I thought he was *serious*. However, you never can tell. Men are so extraordinary! They sometimes masquerade so, their own mothers wouldn't know them."

"Or their sisters."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing worth repeating. Go on with your story."

"Well, then, one evening she brought him here, you remember. I'd asked him to come, when I was in Tuxedo, and he evidently wanted to do so, for he proposed to Amy that she bring him. Of course, I'd no idea he and Miss Lang had ever met before, and when I innocently ordered her in, I did it simply because Radcliffe was refractory and refused to come without her, and I couldn't have a scene before guests."

"Well?"

"I didn't know Mr. Van Brandt came from Grand Rapids. How should I? One never thinks of those little, provincial towns as having any *society*."

"You dear insular, insolent New Yorker."

"Well, you may jeer as much as you like, but that's the way one feels. I didn't know that, as Martha says, he was 'formerly born' in Michigan. I just took him for granted, as one does people one meets in our best houses. He's evidently of good stock, he has money (not a fortune, perhaps, but enough), he's handsome, and he's seen everywhere with the smartest people in town."

"Well?"

"Well, naturally Amy doesn't want to lose him, especially as she's really awfully fond of him and he *is* uncommonly attractive, you know."

"Well?"

"It looks as if that one glimpse of Miss Lang had been enough to upset everything for Amy. He's hardly been there since."

"And what does she propose to do about it?"

"She doesn't know what to do about it. That's where my suggestions and advice are to come in."

"I see."

"Of course, we can't be certain, but from what Bob Van Brandt has dropped and from what Amy has been able to gather from other sources, from people who knew Miss Lang and him in their native burg, he was attached to her when she was no more than a kiddie. Then, when they grew up,

he came East and she went abroad, and they lost sight of each other. But, as I say, that one glimpse of her was enough to ignite the old flame. You must have seen yourself how frankly, openly he showed his feeling that night."

"Well?"

"What is one to do about it?"

"Do about what?"

"Why—the whole thing! Don't you see, I'm responsible in a way. If I hadn't called Miss Lang in, Bob Van Brandt wouldn't have known she was here, and then he would have kept on with Amy. Now he's dropped her it's up to me to make it up to her somehow."

"It's up to you to make *what* up to Amy?"

"How dense you are! Why, the loss of Bob Van Brandt."

"But if she didn't have him, how could she lose him?"

"She didn't exactly have him, but she had a fighting chance."

"And she wants to fight?"

"I think she'd be willing to fight, if she saw her way to winning out."

"Winning out against Miss Lang?"

"Yes, if you want to put it so brutally."

"I see you are assuming that Miss Lang is keen about Van Brandt."

"Would you wonder if she were? It would be

her salvation. Of course, I don't feel about her any longer as I did once. I know *now* she's a lady, but the fact of her poverty remains. If she married Bob Van Brandt, she'd be comfortably settled. She'd have ease and position and, oh, of course she'll marry him if he asks her."

"So the whole thing resolves itself down to——"

"To this—if one could only devise a way to prevent his asking her."

"Am I mistaken, or did I hear you say something about putting it brutally, a few moments ago."

"Well, I know it sounds rather horrid, but a desperate case needs desperate medicine."

"Catherine, you have asked for suggestions and advice. My suggestion to Miss Pelham is that she gracefully step down and out. My advice to you is that you resist the temptation to meddle. If Mr. Van Brandt wishes to ask Miss Lang to marry him, he has a man's right to do so. If Miss Lang wishes to marry Mr. Van Brandt after he has asked her, she has a woman's right to do so. Any interference whatsoever would be intolerable. You can take my advice or leave it. But *if* you leave it, if you attempt to mix in, you will regret it, for you will not be honorably playing the game."

Mrs. Sherman's lips tightened. "That's all very well," she broke out impatiently. "That's the sort of advice men always give to women, and never act on themselves. It's not the masculine way to sit calmly by and let another carry off what one wants. If a man *cares,* he fights for his rights. It's only when he isn't interested that he's passive and speaks of *honorably playing the game.* All's fair in love and war! If you were in Amy's place—if the cases were reversed—and you saw something you'd set your heart on being deliberately taken away from you, I fancy *you* wouldn't gracefully step down and out. At least I don't see you doing it, in my mind's eye, Horatio!"

"Ah, but you miss the point! There's a great difference between claiming one's own and struggling to get possession of something that is lawfully another's. If I were in Miss Pelham's place, and were *sure* the one I loved belonged to me by divine right, I'd have her—I'd have her in spite of the devil and all his works. But the thing would be to be *sure.* And one couldn't be sure so long as another claimant hadn't had his chance to be thrown down. When he'd had his chance, and the decks were cleared—*then*——!"

"Goodness, Frank! I'd no idea you could be so intense. And I'll confess I've never given you credit for so much imagination. You've been

talking of what you'd do in Amy's place quite as if you actually felt it. Your performance of the determined lover is really most convincing."

Francis Ronald smiled. "A man who's succeeded in *convincing* a woman has not lived in vain," he said. "Well, I must be off, Catherine. Good luck to you and to Miss Pelham—but bad luck if either of you dares stick her mischievous finger in other people's pies."

He strode out of the room and the house.

Meanwhile, Martha, industriously engaged in brushing Miss Lang's hair, was gradually, delicately feeling her way toward what was, in reality, the same subject.

"Well, of course, you can have Cora if you want her. She'll be only too glad o' the ride, but *do* you think—now do you *reelly* think it's advisable to lug a third party along when it's clear as dish-water he wants you alone by himself an' *yourself*? It's this way with men. If they set out to do a thing, they gener'ly do it. But believe *me,* if you put impederments in their way, they'll shoor do it, an' then some. Now all them flowers an' candy that's been comin' here lately so reg'ler, they means business on Mr. Van Brandt's part *if* pleasure on yours. He's strewin' your path with roses an' pavin' it with Huyler's chocolates, so's some day in the near future he can come marchin' along it, an' walk straight up

to the captain's office an' hand in his applercation for the vacancy. Now, the question is as plain as the nose on your face. Do you want him to do it first or do you want him to do it last? It's up to you to decide the time, but you can betcher life it's goin' to be some time, Cora or no Cora, *ohne oder mit* as our Dutch friend acrost the hall says."

Claire's reflection in the mirror she sat facing, showed a pair of sadly troubled eyes.

"O, it's very puzzling, Martha," she said. "Somehow, life seems all topsy-turvy to me lately. So many things going wrong, so few right."

"Now what, if I may make so bold, is wrong with your gettin' a first-class offer from a well-off, good-lookin' gen'l'man-friend, that's been keepin' comp'ny with you, off an' on, as you might say, ever since you was a child, which shows that his heart's in the right place an' his intentions is honorable. You know, you mustn't let the percession get by you. Life's like standin' on the curbstone watching the parade—at least, that's how it seems to young folks. They hear the music an' they see the banners an' the floats an' they think it's goin' to be a continuous performance. After a while they've got so used to the band a-playin' an' the flags a-wavin' that it gets to be an old story, an' they think that's what it'll be right

along, so they don't trouble to keep their eye peeled for the fella with the water-can, which he asked 'em to watch out for him. No, they argue he's good enough in his way, but—'*Think* o' the fella with the drum!' Or even, it might be, who knows?—the grand one with his mother's big black muff on his head, doin' stunts with his grandfather's gold-topped club, his grandpa havin' been a p'liceman with a pull in the ward. An' while they stand a-waitin' for all the grandjer they're expectin', suddenly it all goes past, an' they don't see nothin' but p'raps a milk-wagon bringin' up the rear, an' the ashfalt all strewed with rag-tag-an'-bobtail, an' there's nothin' doin' in their direction, except turn around an' go home. Now, what's the matter with Mr. Van Brandt? If you marry him you'll be all to the good. No worry about the rent, no pinchin' here an' plottin' there to keep the bills down. No goin' out by the day, rain or shine, traipsin' the street on your two feet when you're so dead tired you could lay down an' let the rest walk over you. Why, lookin' at it from any standpoint-of-view I can't see but it's a grand oppertoonity. An' you're fond of him, ain't you?"

"O, yes, I'm very fond of Mr. Van Brandt. But I'm fond of him as a friend. I couldn't—couldn't—couldn't ever marry him."

"What for you couldn't? It ain't as if you

liked some other fella better! If you liked some other fella better, no matter how little you might think you'd ever get the refusal of'm, I'd say, *stick to the reel article: don't be put off with substitoots.* It ain't no use tryin' to fool your heart. You can monkey with your brain, an' make it believe all sorts of tommyrot, but your heart is dead on to you, an' when it once sets in hankerin' it means business."

Claire nodded unseeingly to her own reflection in the glass.

"Now *my* idea is," Martha continued, "my idea is, if you got somethin' loomin', why, don't hide your face an' play it isn't there. There ain't no use standin' on the ragged edge till every tooth in your head chatters with cold an' fright. You don't make nothin' *by* it. If you love a man like a friend or if you love a friend like a man, my advice is, take your seat in the chair, grip a-holt o' the arms, brace your feet, an'—let'er go, Gallagher! It'll be over in a minit, as the dentists say."

"But suppose you had something else on your heart. Something that had nothing to do with —with that sort of thing?" Claire asked.

"What sorter thing?"

"Why—love. Suppose you'd done something unworthy of you. Suppose the sense of having done it made you wretched, made you want to

make others wretched? What would you do—then?"

"Now, my dear, don't you make no mistake. I ain't goin' to be drew into no blindman's grab-bag little game, not on your sweet life. I ain'ter goin' to risk havin' you hate me all the rest o' your nacherl life becoz, to be obligin' an' also to show what a smart boy am I, I give a verdick without all the everdence in. If you wanter tell me plain out what's frettin' you, I'll do my best accordin' to my lights, but otherwise——"

"Well——" began Claire, and then followed, haltingly, stumblingly, the story of her adventure in the closet.

"At first I felt nothing but the wound to my pride, the sting of what he—of what *they* said," she concluded. "But, after a little, I began to realize there was something else. I began to see what *I* had done. For, you know, I had deliberately listened. I needn't have listened. If I had put my hands over my ears, if I had crouched back, away from the door, and covered my head, I need not have overheard. But I pressed as close as I could to the panel, and hardly breathed, because I wanted not to miss a word. And I didn't miss a word. I heard what it was never meant I should hear, and—I'm nothing but a common—*eavesdropper!*"

"Now, what do you think of that?" observed

Mrs. Slawson. "Now, what do you think of that?"

"I've tried once or twice to tell him——" continued Claire.

"Tell who? Tell Mr. Van Brandt?"

"No, Mr. Ronald."

"O! You see, when you speak o' *he* an' *him* it might mean almost any gen'l'man. But I'll try to remember you're always referrin' to Mr. Ronald."

"I've tried once or twice to tell him, for I can't bear to be untruthful. But, then, I remember I'm 'only the governess'—'the right person in the right place'—of so little account that—that he doesn't even know whether I'm pretty or not! And the words choke in my throat. I realize it wouldn't mean anything to him. He'd only probably gaze down at me, or he'd be kind in that lofty way he has—and put me in my place, as he did the first time I ever saw him. And so, I've never told him. I couldn't. But sometimes I think if I did—if I just *made* myself do it, I could hold up my head again and not feel myself growing bitter and sharp, because something is hurting me in my conscience."

"That's it!" said Martha confidently. "It's your conscience. Believe *me,* consciences is the dickens an' all for makin' a mess o' things, when they get right down to business. Now, if I was

you, I wouldn't bother Mr. Ronald with my squalms o' conscience. Very prob'ly when it comes to consciences he has troubles of his own—at least, if he ain't, he's an exception an' a rare curiosity, an' Mr. Pierpont Morgan oughter buy him for the Museum. When your conscience tells you you'd oughter tell, ten to one you'd oughtn't. Give other folks a chance. What they don't know can't worry 'em. Besides, your just *tellin'* a thing don't let you out. You can't get clear so easy as that. It's up to you to work it out, so what's wrong is made *right,* an' do it *yourself*—not trust to nobody else. You can't square up by heavin' your load offn your own shoulders onto another fella's. You think you feel light coz you done your dooty, when ten to one you *done* your friend. No! I wouldn't advise turnin' state's everdence on yourself unless it was to save another from the gallus. As it is, you can take it from me, the best thing you can do for that—conscience o' yours, is get busy in another direction. Dress yourself up as fetchin' as you can, go out motorin' with your gen'l'man friend like he ast you to, let him get his perposal offn his chest, an' then tell'm—you'll be a sister to'm."

CHAPTER XV

SAM SLAWSON had gone to the Adirondacks in January, personally conducted by Mr. Blennerhasset, Mr. Ronald's secretary, Mr. Ronald, in the most unemotional and business-like manner, having assumed all the responsibilities connected with the trip and Sam's stay at the Sanatorium.

It was Claire who told Mr. Ronald of the Slawsons' difficulty. How Martha saw no way out, and still was struggling gallantly on, trying single-handed to meet all obligations at home and, in addition, send her husband away.

"That's too much—even for Martha," he observed.

"If I only knew how to get Sam to the mountains," Claire said in a sort of desperation.

"You have just paved the way."

"How?"

"You have told me."

"You are going to help?"

"Yes."

"O, how beautiful!"

"I am glad that, for once, I have the good fortune to please you."

Claire's happy smile faded. She turned her face away, pretending to busy herself with Radcliffe's books.

"I see I have offended once more."

She hesitated a moment, then faced him squarely.

"There can be no question of your either pleasing or offending me, Mr. Ronald. What you are doing for Martha makes me glad, of course, but that is only because I rejoice in any good that may come to her. I would not take it upon myself to praise you for doing a generous act, or to blame you if you didn't do it."

"'Cr-r-rushed again!'" observed Francis Ronald gravely, but with a lurking, quizzical light of laughter in his eyes.

For an instant Claire was inclined to be resentful. Then, her sense of humor coming to the rescue, she dropped her heroics and laughed out blithely.

"How jolly it must be to have a lot of money and be able to do all sorts of helpful, generous things!" she said lightly.

"You think money the universal solvent?"

"I think the lack of it the universal *in*solvent."

"I hope you don't lay too much emphasis on it."

"Why?"

"Because it might lead you to do violence to your better impulses, your higher instincts."

"Why should a man think he has the right to say that sort of thing to a woman? Would you consider it a compliment if I suggested that your principles were hollow—negotiable? That they were For Sale or To Let, like an empty house?"

"I suppose most men would tell you they have no use for principle in their business—only principal."

"And you think women——"

"Generally women have both principle and interest in the business of life. That's why we look to them to keep up the moral standard. That's why we feel it to be unworthy of her when a girl makes a mercenary marriage."

The indignant blood sprang to Claire's cheeks. What business had he to interfere in her affairs, to warn her against marrying Bob Van Brandt, assuming that, if she did marry him, it would be only for money. She was glad that Radcliffe bounded in just then, throwing himself upon her in his eagerness to tell her all that had befallen him during their long separation of two hours, when he had been playing on the Mall under Beetrice's unwatchful eye.

In spite of Martha, Claire had just been on the point of confessing to Mr. Ronald. He had seemed so friendly, so much less formidable than at any time since that first morning. But she must have been mistaken, for here were all the old

barriers up in an instant, and with them the resentful fire in her heart.

Perhaps it was the memory of this conversation that made her feel so ill at ease with Robert Van Brandt. She could not understand herself. Why should she feel so uncomfortable with her old friend? She could not help being aware that he cared for her, but why did the thought of his telling her so make her feel like a culprit? Why should he not tell her? Why should she not listen? One thing she felt she knew—if he did tell her, and she refused to listen, he would give it up. He would not persist.

She remembered how, as a little girl, she had looked up to him reverentially as "big Robby Van Brandt." He was a hero to her in those days, until—he had let himself be balked of what he had started out to get. If he had only persisted, *in*sisted, who knows—maybe——

She was sure that if he offered her his love and she refused to accept it, he would not, like the nursery-rhyme model, try, try again. He would give up and go away—and in her loneliness she did not want him to go away. Was she selfish? she wondered. Selfish or no, she could not bring herself to follow Martha's advice and "let'm get his perposal offn his chest."

It was early in April before he managed to do it.

She and Radcliffe had gone to the Park. Radcliffe was frisking about in the warm sunshine, while Claire watched him from a nearby bench, when, suddenly, Mr. Van Brandt dropped into the seat beside her.

He did not approach his subject gradually. He plunged in desperately, headlong, heartlong, seeming oblivious to everything and every one save her.

When, at last, he left her, she, knowing it was for always, was sorely tempted to call him back. She did care for him, in a way, and the life his love opened up to her would be very different from this. And yet——

She closed her cold fingers about Radcliffe's little warm ones, and rose to lead him across the Plaza. She did not wonder at his being so conveniently close at hand, nor at his unwonted silence all the way home. She had not realized, until now that it was snapped, how much the link between this and her old home-life had meant to her. It meant so much that tears were very near the surface all that day, and even at night, when Martha was holding forth to her brood, they were not altogether to be suppressed.

"Easter comes early this year," Mrs. Slawson observed.

"'M I going to have a new hat?" inquired Cora.

"What for do you need a new hat, I should like to know? I s'pose you think you'll walk up Fifth Avenoo in the church parade, an' folks'll stare at you, an' nudge each other an' whisper—'Looka there! That's Miss Cora Slawson that you read so much about in the papers. That one on the right-hand side, wearin' the French *shappo,* with the white ribbon, an' the grand vinaigrette onto it. Ain't she han'some?'"

"I think you're real mean to make fun of me!" pouted Cora.

"I got a dollar an' a half for the Easter singin'," announced Sammy. "Coz I'm permoted an' I'm goin' to sing a solo!"

"Careful you don't get your head so turned you sing outer the other side o' your mouth," cautioned Martha. "'Stead o' crowin' so much, you better make sure you know your colic."

"What you goin' to do with your money?" inquired Francie, unable to conceive of possessing such vast riches.

"I do' know."

"Come here an' I'll tell you," said his mother. "Whisper!"

At first Sammy's face did not reveal any great amount of satisfaction at the words breathed into his ear, but after a moment it fairly glowed.

"Ain't that grand?" asked Martha.

Sammy beamed, then went off whistling.

"He's goin' to invest it in a hat for Cora as a s'prise, me addin' my mite to the fun' an' not lettin' him be any the wiser. An' Cora, she's goin' to get *him* a pair o' shoes with her bank pennies, an' be this an' be that, the one thinks he's clothin' the other, an' is proud as Punch of it, which they're learnin' manners the same time they're bein' dressed," Martha explained to Claire later.

"I wish you'd tell that to Radcliffe," Claire said. "He loves to hear about the children, and he can learn so much from listening to what is told of other kiddies' generosities and self-denials."

Martha shook her head. "There's nothin' worth tellin'," she said. "An' besides, if I told'm, he might go an' tell his mother or his Uncle Frank, an' they might think I was puttin' in a bid for a Easter-egg on my own account. Radcliffe is a smart little fella! He knows a thing or two—an' sometimes three, an' don't you forget it."

That Radcliffe "knew a thing or two—an' sometimes three," he proved beyond a doubt to Martha next day when, as she was busy cleaning his Uncle Frank's closet, he meandered up to her and casually observed:

"Say, you know what I told you once 'bout Miss Lang bein' Mr. Van Brandt's best girl?"

"Yes."

"Well, she ain't!"

"Why ain't she?"

"I was lookin' out o' the window in my mother's sittin'-room yesterday mornin', an' when my mother an' my Uncle Frank they came up from breakfast, they didn't see me coz I was back o' the curtains. My mother she had a letter Shaw, he just gave her, and when she read it she clapped her hands together an' laughed, an' my Uncle Frank he said, 'Why such joy?' an' she said, 'The greatest news! Amy Pelham is engaged to Mr. Van Brandt!' An' my Uncle Frank, his face got dark red all at once, an' he said to my mother, 'Catherine, are you 'sponsible for that?' an' she said, 'I never lifted a finger. I give you my word of honor, Frank!' An' then my Uncle Frank he looked better. An' my mother she said, 'You see, he couldn't have cared for Miss Lang, after all—I mean, the way we thought.' An' he said, 'Why not?' An' she said, 'Coz if he had asked her, she would have taken him, for no poor little governess is going to throw away a chance like that. No sensible girl would say *no* to Bob Van Brandt with all his 'vantages. She'd jump at him, an' you couldn't blame her.'

"An' then my mother an' my Uncle Frank *they* jumped, for I came out from behind the curtains

where I'd been lookin' out, an' I said, 'She would too say *no!* My Miss Lang, she's sensible, an' one time in the Park, when Mr. Van Brandt he asked her to take him an' everything he had (that's what he said! "Take me an' everything I have, an' do what you want with me!"), Miss Lang she said, "No, Bob, I can't! I wish I could, for your sake, if you want me so—but—I can't." An' Mr. Van Brandt he felt so bad, I was sorry. When I thought Miss Lang was his best girl, I didn't like him, but I didn't want him to feel as bad as that. An' he went off all alone by himself, an' Miss Lang——' Only I couldn't tell any more, for my Uncle Frank, he said reel sharp, 'That's enough, Radcliffe!' But last night he brought me home a dandy boat I can sail on the Lake, with riggin' an' a center-board, an', O, lots o' things! An' so I guess he wasn't so very mad, after all."

CHAPTER XVI

"MOST like it's the Spring," said Martha. It was Memorial Day. She and Miss Lang were at home, sitting together in Claire's pretty room, through the closed blinds of which the hot May sun sent tempered shafts of light.

Claire regarded Mrs. Slawson steadily for a moment, seeming to make some sort of mental calculation meanwhile.

"Well, if it *is* the Spring," she observed at length with a whimsical little frown knitting her brows, "it's mighty forehanded, for it began to get in its fine work as far back as January. Ever since the time Sam went to the Sanatorium you've been losing flesh and color, Martha, and—I don't know what to do about it!"

"Do about it!" repeated Mrs. Slawson. "Why, there ain't nothin' *to* do about it, but let the good work go on. I'm in luck, if it's true what you say. Believe *me,* there's lots o' ladies in this town, is starvin' their stummicks an' everythin' else about 'em, an' payin' the doctors high besides, just to get delicate-complected, an' airy-fairy figgers, same's I'm doin' without turnin' a hand. Did you never hear o' bantin'? It's what

the high-toned doctors recommend to thin down ladies who have it so comfortable they're uncomfortable. The doctors prescribes exercise for'm, an' they take it, willin' as doves, whereas if their husbands said, 'Say, old woman, while you're restin', just scrub down the cellar-stairs good—that'll take the flesh off'n you quicker'n anythin' else *I* know!' they'd get a divorce from him so quick you couldn't see 'em for dust. No, they'd not do anythin' so low as cellar-stairs, to save their lives. You couldn't please 'em better'n to see another woman down on her marra-bones workin' for 'em, but get down themselves? Not on your sweet life, they wouldn't. They'd rather *bant*. Bantin' sounds so much more stylisher than scrubbin'."

Claire smiled, but her eyes were very serious as she said, "All the same, Martha, I believe you are grieving your heart out for Sam. I've been watching you when you didn't know it, and I've seen the signs and the tokens. Your heart has the hunger-ache in it!"

"Now, what do you think o' that!" exclaimed Mrs. Slawson. "What do *you* know about hearts an' hunger-aches, I should like to know. You, an unmarried maiden-girl, without so much as the shadder or the skelegan of a beau, as far as *I* can see. What do *you* know about a woman hungerin' an' cravin' for her own man? You

have to have reelly felt them things yourself, to know the signs of 'em in other folks."

Claire's lip trembled, but she did not reply.

When Martha spoke again it was as if she had replied.

"O, go 'way! *You* ain't never had a leanin' in any gen'l'man's direction, I'd be willin' to wager. An' yet, I may as well tell you, you been gettin' kinder white an' scrawny yourself lately, beggin' your pardon for bein' so bold as notice it. Mind, I ain't the faintest notion of holdin' it against you! I know better than think you been settin' your affections on anybody. There's other things *besides* love gives you that tired feelin'. What you need is somethin' to brace you up, an' clear your blood, like Hoodses Sassperilla. Everybody feels the way you do, this time o' year. I heard a young saleslady (she wasn't a woman, mind you, she was a sales*lady*), I heard a young saleslady in the car the other mornin' complain—she was the reel dressy kind, you know, with more'n a month's pay of hair, boilin' over on the back of her head in puffs an' things—the gallus sort that, if you want to buy a yard o' good flannen off her, will sass you up an' down to your face, as fresh as if she was your own daughter—she was complainin' 'the Spring always made her feel so sorter, kinder, so awful la-anguid.'"

"Martha, dear," broke in Claire irrelevantly, "I wonder if you'd mind very much if I told Mr. Ronald the truth. He thinks you were an old family servant. He thinks you nursed me till I was able to walk."

Martha considered. "Well, ain't that the truth?" she asked blandly. "I lived out from the time I was twelve years old. That was in Mrs. Granville's mother's house. When I was sixteen I went to Mrs. Granville's. I was kitchen-maid there first-off, an' gradjelly she promoted me till I was first housemaid. I never left her till I got married. If that don't make me an old family servant, I'd like to know."

"But he thinks you were an old family servant in *our* house."

"Well, bless your heart, that's *his* business, not mine. How can I help what he thinks?"

"Didn't you tell him, Martha dear, that you nursed me till I was able to walk?"

"Shoor I did! An' it's the livin' truth. What's the matter with that? Believe *me,* you wasn't good for more than a minit or two more on your legs, when I got you into your bed that blessed night. You was clean bowled over, an' you couldn't 'a' walked another step if you'd been killed for it. Didn't I nurse you them days you was in bed, helplesslike as a baby? Didn't I nurse you till you could walk?"

"Indeed you did. And that's precisely the point!" said Claire. "If Mr. Ronald—if Mrs. Sherman knew the truth, that I was poor, homeless, without a friend in New York the night you picked me up on the street, and carried me home and cared for me without knowing a thing about me, they mightn't—they *wouldn't* have taken me into their house and given me their little boy to train. And because they wouldn't, I want to tell them. I want to square myself. I ought to have told them long ago. I want——"

"You want 'em to bounce you," observed Mrs. Slawson calmly. "Well, there's always more'n one way of lookin' at things. For instance, any good chambermaid, *with experience,* will tell you there's three ways of dustin'. The first is, do it thora, wipin' the rungs o' the chairs, an' the backs o' the pictures, an' under the books on the table-like. The second is, just sorter flashin' your rag over the places that shows, an' the third is—pull down the shades. They're all good enough ways in their own time an' place, an' you foller them accordin' to your disposition or, if you're nacherelly particular, accordin' to the other things you got to do, in the time you got to do 'em *in.* Now, *I'm* particular. I'm the nacherelly thora kind, but if I'm pressed, an' there's more important things up to me than the dustin', I give it a lick an' a promise, same as the next one, an'

let it go at that, till the time comes I can do better. Life's too short to fuss an' fidget your soul out over trifles. It ain't always what you *want,* but what you *must.* You sometimes got to cut short at one end so's you can piece out at another, an' you can take it from me, you only pester folks by gettin' 'm down where they can't resist you, an' forcin' a lot of hard facks down their throats, which ain't the *truth* anyhow, an' which they don't want to swaller on no account. What do they care about the machinery, so long as it turns out the thing they want? Believe *me,* it's foolishness to try to get 'em back into the works, pokin' about among the inside wheels an' springs, an' so forth. You likely get knocked senseless by some big thing-um-bob you didn't know was there. Now I know just eggsackly what's in your mind, but you're wrong. You think I told Mr. Ronald fibs. I didn't tell'm fibs. I just give'm the truth the way he'd take it, like you give people castor-oil that's too dainty to gullup it down straight. Some likes it in lemon, an' some in grobyules, but it's castor-oil all the same. He wanted to know the truth about you, an' I let him have it, the truth bein' you're as fine a lady as any in the land. If I'd happened to live in Grand Rapids at the time, I'd most likely of lived out with your grandmother, an' been an old family servant in your house like I

was at Mrs. Granville's, an' I certainly would of nursed you if I'd had the chanct. It was just a case o' happenso, my *not* havin' it. The right kind o' folks here in New York is mighty squeamish about strangers. They want recommendations—they want 'em because they want to be sure the ones they engage is O. K. That's all recommendations is for, ain't it? Now I knew the minit I clapped eye to you, that, as I say, you was as grand a lady as any in the land, an' that bein' the case, what was the use o' frettin' because I hadn't more than your sayso to prove it. But if I'd pulled a long face to Mrs. Sherman, an' told her, hesitatin'-like an' nervous, about—well, about what took place that night, she, not havin' much experience of human nature (only the other kind that's more common here in New York City), she'd have hemmed, an' hawed, an' thought she'd better not try it, seein' Radcliffe is such an angel-child an' not to be trained except by a A-1 Lady."

"But the truth," persisted Claire.

"I tell the truth," Mrs. Slawson returned with quiet dignity. "I only don't waste time on trifles."

"It is not wasting time on trifles to be exact and accurate. An architect planning a house must make every little detail *true,* else when the house goes up, it won't stand."

"Don't he have to reckon nothin' on the *give* or *not-give* of the things he's dealin' with?" demanded Martha. "I'm only a ignorant woman, an' I ask for information. When you're dressmakin' you have to allow for the seams, an' when you're makin'—well, other things, you have to do the same thing, only spelled a little different—you have to allow for the *seems*. Most folks don't do it, an' that's where a lot o' trouble comes in, or so it appears to me."

Claire twisted her ring in silence, gazing down at it the while as if the operation was, of all others, the most important and absorbing.

"We may not agree, Martha dear," she said at last, "but anyway I know you're good, good, *good,* and I wouldn't hurt your feelings for the world."

"Shoor! I know you wouldn't! An' they ain't hurt. Not in the least. You got one kinder conscience an' I got another, that's all. Consciences is like hats. One that suits one party would make another look like a guy. You got to have your own style. You got to know what's best for you, an' then *stick to it!*"

"And you won't object if I tell Mr. Ronald?"

"Objeck? Certainly not! Tell'm anything you like. *I* always was fond o' Mr. Ronald myself. I never thought he was as hard an' stern

with a body as some thinks. Some thinks he's as hard as nails, but——"

"O, I'm *sure* he's not," cried Claire with unexpected loyalty. "His manner may seem a little cold and proud sometimes, but I know he's very kind and generous."

"Certaintly. So do I know it," said Mrs. Slawson. "I don't say I mayn't be mistaken, but I have the highest opinion o' Lor—Mr. Ronald. I think you could trust'm do the square thing, no matter what, an' if he was kinder harsh doin' it, it's only because he expects a body to be perfect like he is himself."

In the next room Sabina was shouting at the top of her lungs—"Come back to ear-ring, my voornean, my voornean!"

"Ain't it a caution what lungs that child has—considerin'?" Martha reflected. "Just hear her holler! She'd wake the dead. I wonder if she's tryin' to beat that auta whoopin' it up outside. Have you ever noticed them autas nowadays? Some of them has such croupy coughs, before I know it I'm huntin' for a flannen an' a embrercation. 'Xcuse me a minit while I go answer the bell."

A second later she returned. A step in advance of her was Mr. Ronald.

"I am lucky to find you at home, Martha," were the first words Claire heard him say.

Martha, by dint of a little unobservable maneuvering, managed to superimpose her substantial shadow upon Claire's frail one.

"Yes, sir. When I get a day to lay off in, you couldn't move me outer the house with a derrick," she announced. "Miss Lang's here, too. Bein' so dim, an' comin' in outer the sunlight, perhaps you don't make out to see her."

"She ain't had time yet to pull herself together," Mrs. Slawson inwardly noted. "But, Lord! I couldn't stand in front of her forever, an' even if a girl *is* dead in love with a man (more power to her!), that's no reason she should go to the other extreme to hide it, an' pertend she's a cold storage, warranted to freeze'm stiff, like the artificial ice they're makin' these days, in the good old summertime."

The first cold greetings over, Claire started to retreat in the direction of the door.

"Excuse me, please—I promised Francie—— She's expecting me—she's waiting——"

"Pshaw now, let her wait!" said Martha.

"Don't let me detain Miss Lang if she wishes to go," interposed Mr. Ronald. "My business is really with you, Martha."

"Thank you, sir. But I'd like Miss Lang to stay by, all the same—that is, if you don't objeck."

"As a witness? You think I need watching, eh?"

"I think it does a body good to watch you, sir!"

"I didn't know before, you were a flatterer, Martha. But I see you're a lineal descendant of the Blarney Stone."

Claire felt herself utterly ignored. She tried again to slip away, but Martha's strong hand detained her, bore her down into the place she had just vacated.

"How is Francie?" inquired Mr. Ronald, taking the chair Mrs. Slawson placed for him.

"*Fine*—thank you, sir. The doctors says they never see a child get well so fast. She's grown so fat an' big, there ain't a thing belongs to her will fit her any longer, they're all shorter, an' she has to go whacks with Cora on her clo'es."

"Perhaps she'd enjoy a little run out into the country this afternoon in my car. The other children, too? And—possibly—Miss Lang."

"I'm sure they'd all thank you kindly, sir," began Martha, when—"I'm sorry," said Claire coldly, "I can't go."

Mr. Ronald did not urge her. "It is early. We have plenty of time to discuss the ride later," he observed quietly. "Meanwhile, what I have in mind, Martha, is this: Mr. Slawson has been at the Sanatorium now for——?"

"Goin' on five months," said Martha.

"And the doctors think him improved?"

"Well, on the whole, yes, sir. His one lung (sounds kinder Chineesy, don't it?), his one lung ain't no worse—it's better some—only he keeps losin' flesh an' that puzzles'm."

"Do you think he is contented there?"

"He says he is. He says it's the grand place, an' they're all as good to'm as if he was the king o' Harlem. *You* seen to that, sir—he says. An' Sam, he's always pationate, no matter what comes, but——"

"Well—*but?*"

"But—only just, it ain't *home,* you know, sir!"

"I see. And the doctors think he ought to stay up there? Not return home—*here,* I mean?"

"That's what they say."

"Have you—the means to keep him at the Sanatorium over the five months we settled for in January?"

"No, sir. That is, not—not *yet.*"

"Would you like to borrow enough money to see him through the rest of the year?"

Martha deliberated. "I may *have* to, sir," she said at last with a visible effort. "But I don't like to borrer. I notice when folks gets the borrerin'-habit they're slow payin' back, an'

then you don't get thanks for a gift or you don't get credit for a loan."

This time it was Mr. Ronald who seemed to be considering. "Right!" he announced presently. "I notice you go into things rather deep, Martha."

Mrs. Slawson smiled. "Well, when things *is* deep, that's the way you got to go into them. What's on your plate you got to chew, an' if you don't like it, you can lump it, an' if you don't like to lump it, you can cut it up finer. But there it *is*, an' there it stays, till you swaller it, somehow."

"Do you enjoy or resent the good things that are, or seem to be, heaped on other people's plates?"

"Why, yes. Certaintly I enjoy 'em. But, after all, the things taste best that we're eatin' ourselves, don't they? An' if I had money enough like some, so's I didn't have to borrer to see my man through, why, I don't go behind the door to say I'd be glad an' grateful."

"Would you take the money as a gift, Martha?"

"You done far more than your share already, sir."

"Then, if you won't *take,* and you'd rather not borrow, we must find another way. A rather good idea occurred to me last night. I've an uncommonly nice old place up in New Hampshire—

in the mountains. It was my father's—and my grandfather's. It's been closed for many years, and I haven't given it a thought, except when the tax-bills came due, or the caretaker sent in his account. It's so far away my sister won't live there, and—it's too big and formidable for one lone man to summer in by himself. Now, why wouldn't it be a capital idea for you to pack up your goods and chattels here, and take your family right up there—make that your home? The lodge is comfortable and roomy, and I don't see why Mr. Slawson couldn't recover there as well, if not better, than where he is. I'd like to put the place in order—make some improvements, do a little remodeling. I need a trusty man to oversee the laborers, and keep an eye and close tab on the workmen I send up from town. If Mr. Slawson would act as superintendent for me, I'd pay him what such a position is worth, and you would have your house, fuel, and vegetables free. Don't try to answer now. You'd be foolish to make a decision in a hurry that you might regret later. Write to your husband. Talk it over with him. He might prefer to choose a job for himself. And remember—it's 'way out in the country. The children would have to walk some distance to school."

"Give 'em exercise, along of their exercises," said Martha.

"The church in the village is certainly three miles off."

"My husband don't go to church as reg'lar as I might wish," Mrs. Slawson observed. "I tell'm, the reason men don't be going to church so much these days, is for fear they might hear something they believe."

"You would find country life tame, perhaps, after the city."

"Well, the city life ain't been that *wild* for me that I'd miss the dizzy whirl. An' anyhow—we'd be *together!*" Martha said. "We'd be together, maybe, come our weddin'-day. The fourth o' July. We never been parted oncet, on that day, all the fifteen years we been married," she mused, "but——"

"Well?"

"But, come winter, an' Mis' Sherman opens the house again, an' wants Miss Claire back, who's goin' to look out for *her?*"

"Why—a—as to *that*——" said Mr. Ronald, so vaguely it sounded almost supercilious to Claire.

In an instant her pride rose in revolt, rebelling against the notion he might have, that she could possibly put forth any claim upon his consideration.

"O, please, *please* don't think of me, Martha," she cried vehemently. "I have entirely

other plans. You mustn't give me, or my affairs, a thought, in settling your own. You must do what's best for *you.* You mustn't count for, or *on,* me in the least. I have not told you before, but I've made up my mind I must resign my position at Mrs. Sherman's, anyway. I'll write her at once. I'll tell her myself, of course, but I tell you now to show that you mustn't have me in mind, at all, in making your plans."

Martha's low-pitched voice fell upon Claire's tense, nervous one with soothing calmness.

"Certainly not, Miss Claire," she said.

"And you'll write to your husband and report to him what I propose," suggested Mr. Ronald, as if over Claire's head.

"Shoor I will, sir!"

"And if he likes the idea, my secretary will discuss the details with him later. Wages, duties —all the details."

"Yes, sir."

"And you may tell the children I'll leave orders that the car be sent for them some other day. I find it's not convenient, after all, for me to take them myself this afternoon. I spoke too fast in proposing it. But they'll not be disappointed. Mr. Blennerhasset will see to that. I leave town to-night to be gone—well, indefinitely. In any case, until well on into the autumn or winter. Any letter you may direct to me, care of Mr.

Blennerhasset at the office, will be attended to at once. Good-by, Martha!—Miss Lang——" He was gone.

When the car had shot out of sound and sight, Martha withdrew from the window, from behind the blinds of which she had been peering eagerly.

"He certainly *is* a little woolly wonder, meaning no offense," she observed with a deep-drawn sigh. "Yes, Mr. Ronald is as good as they make 'em, an' dontcher forget it!"

She seated herself opposite Claire, drawing her chair quite close.

"Pity you an' him is so on the outs. I'm not speakin' o' *him,* s'much, but anybody with half an eye can see *you* got a reg'lar hate on'm. *Any one* can see that!"

A moment of silence, and then Claire flung herself, sobbing and quivering, across Martha's lap, ready to receive her.

"O, *Martha!*" she choked.

CHAPTER XVII

"WELL now, what do you think o' that! Ain't it the end o' the law? The high-handed way he has o' doin' things! Think o' the likes o' *me* closin' up my '*town-house*' an' takin' my fam'ly (includin' Flicker an' Nixcomeraus) 'to the country-place'—for all the world like I was a lady, born an' bred.—Sammy, you sit still in your seat, an' eat the candy Mr. Blennerhasset brought you, an' quit your rubberin', or the train'll start suddently, an' give you a twist in your neck you won't get over in a hurry. . . . Ma, you comfortable? . . . Cora an' Francie, see you behave like little ladies, or I'll attend to you later. See how quiet Sabina is—— Say, Sabina, what you doin'? Now, what do you think o' that! If that child ain't droppin' off to sleep, suckin' the red plush o' the seat! For all the world like she didn't have a wink o' rest last night, or a bite or a sup this mornin'—an' she slep' the clock 'round, an' et a breakfast fit for a trooper. Say, Sabina—here, wake up! An' take your tongue off'n that beautiful cotton-backed plush, d'you hear? In the first place, the gen'l'men that owns this railroad don't want their

upholsterry et by little girls, an', besides, it's makin' your mouth all red—an', second-place, the cars isn't the time to sleep—leastwise, not so early in the mornin'. Miss Claire, child, don't look so scared! You ain't committin' no crime goin' along with us, an' *he*'ll never suspicion anyhow. He's prob'ly on the boundin' biller by this time, an' Mr. Blennerhasset he don't know you from a hole in the ground. Besides, whose business is it, anyway? You ain't goin' as *his* guest, as I told you before. You're *my* boarder, same's you've always been, an' it's nobody's concern if you board down here or up there. . . .

"Say, ain't these flowers just grand? The box looks kinder like a young coffin, but never mind that. . . .

"A body would think all that fruit an' stuff was enough of a send-off, but Lor—*Mr.* Ronald, he don't do things by halves, does he? It wouldn't seem so surprisin' now, if he'd 'a' knew you was comin' along an' all this (Mr. Blennerhasset himself helpin' look after us, an' see us off—as if I was a little tender flower that didn't know a railroad ticket from a trunk-check), I say, it wouldn't seem so surprisin' if he'd 'a' knew *you* was comin' along. I'd think it was on your account. What they calls *delicate attentions*. The sorter thing a gen'l'man does when he's got his eye on a young lady for his wife, an'

is sorter breakin' it to her gently—kinder beckonin' with a barn-door, as the sayin' is.

"But Mr. Ronald ain't the faintest notion but you've gone back to your folks in Grand Rapids, an' so all these favors is for *me,* of course. Well, I certainly take to luckshurry like a duck takes to water. I never knew it was so easy to feel comfortable. I guess I been a little hard on the wealthy in the past. Now, if *you* should marry a rich man, I don't believe——"

Claire sighed wearily. "I'll never marry anybody, Martha. And besides, a rich man wouldn't be likely to go to a cheap boarding-house for a wife, and next winter I—— O, isn't it warm? Don't you *wish* the train would start?"

At last the train did start, and they were whirled out of the steaming city, over the hills and far away, through endless stretches of sunlit country, and the long, long hours of the hot summer day, until, at night, they reached their destination, and found Sam Slawson waiting there in the cool twilight to welcome them.

Followed days of rarest bliss for Martha, when she could marshal out her small forces, setting each his particular task, and seeing it was done with thoroughness and despatch, so that in an inconceivably short time her new home shone with all the spotless cleanliness of the old, and added comeliness beside.

"Ain't it the little palace?" she inquired, when all was finished. "I wouldn't change my lodge for the great house, grand as it is, not for anything you could offer me! Nor I wouldn't call the queen my cousin now we're all in it together. I'm feelin' that joyful I'd like to have what they calls a house-swarmin', only there ain't, by the looks of it, any neighbors much, to swarm."

"No," said Ma regretfully, "I noticed there ain't no neighbors—to speak of."

"Well, then, we can't speak o' them," returned Martha. "Which will save us from fallin' under God's wrath as gossips. There's never any great loss without some small gain."

"But we must have some sort of jollification," Claire insisted. "Doesn't your wedding-day—the anniversary of it, I mean—come 'round about this time? You said the Fourth, didn't you?"

Martha nodded. "Sam Slawson an' me'll be fifteen years married come Fourth of July," she announced. "We chose that day, because we was so poor we knew we couldn't do nothin' great in the line o' celebration ourselves, so we just kinder managed it, so's without inconveniencin' the nation any or addin' undooly to its expenses, it would do our celebratin' for us. You ain't no notion how grand it makes a body feel to be woke up at the crack o' dawn on one's weddin' mornin' with the noise o' the bombardin' in honor

o' the day! I'm like to miss it this year, with only my own four young Yankees spoilin' my sleep settin' off torpeders under my nose."

"You won't miss anything," said Claire reassuringly, "but you mustn't say a word to Sam. And you mustn't ask any questions yourself, for what is going to happen is to be a *wonderful* surprise!"

"You betcher life it is!" murmured Martha complacently to herself, after Claire had hastened off to confer with the children and plan a program for the great day.

Ma to make the wedding-cake! Cora to recite her "piece." Francie and Sammy to be dressed as pages and bear, each, a tray spread with the gifts it was to be her own task and privilege to contrive. Sabina to hover over all as a sort of Cupid, who, if somewhat "hefty" as to avoirdupois, was in all other respects a perfect little Love.

It seemed as if the intervening days were winged, so fast they flew. Claire never could have believed there was so much to be done for such a simple festival, and, of course, the entire weight fell on her shoulders, for Ma was as much of a child in such matters as any, and Martha could not be appealed to, being the *bride,* and, moreover, being away at the great house, where tremendous changes were in progress.

But at last came the wonderful day, and everything was in readiness.

First, a forenoon of small explosive delights for the children—then, as the day waned, a dinner eaten outdoors, picnic-fashion on the grass, under the spreading trees, beneath the shadows of the mighty mountain-tops.

What difference if Ma's cake, crowning a perfect feast, had suffered a little in the frosting and its touching sentiment, traced in snowy lettering upon a bridal-white ground, *did* read

FIFTEEN YEARS OF MARRED LIFE.

It is sometimes one's ill-luck to misspell a word, and though a wedding-cake is usually large and this was no exception, the space was limited, and, besides, no one but Sam senior and Miss Lang noticed it anyhow.

A quizzical light in his eye, Mr. Slawson scrawled on a scrap of paper which he passed to Claire (with apologies for the liberty) the words:

"She'd been nearer the truth if she'd left out the two *rr*s while she was about it, and had it:

FIFTEEN YEARS OF MA'D LIFE."

Then came Cora's *piece.*

Her courtesy, right foot back, knees suddenly bent, right hand on left side (presumably over

heart, actually over stomach), chin diving into the bony hollow of her neck—Cora's courtesy was a thing to be remembered.

LADY CLARE

She announced it with ceremony, and this time, Martha noticed, the recalcitrant garter held fast to its moorings.

> "'Twas the time when lilies blow
> And clouds are highest up in air,
> Lord Ronald brought a lily-white doe—'"

"*His!*" prompted Martha in a loud stage-whisper. "*His*—not 'a '——"

Cora accepted the correction obediently, but her self-confidence was shaken. She managed to stammer,

> "'Give t-to—his c-cousin, L-Lady C-Clare,'"

and then a storm of tears set in, drowning her utterance.

"Well, what do you think o' *that?*" exclaimed Martha, amazed at the undue sensitiveness of her offspring. "Never mind, Cora! You done it grand!—as far as you went."

To cover this slight mishap, Claire gave a hurried signal to the pages, who appeared forthwith

in splendid form, if a little overweighted by the burdens they bore. In some strange way Claire's simple gifts had been secretly augmented until they piled up upon the trays, twin-mountains of treasure.

When the first surprise was past, and the wonders examined and exclaimed over, Martha bent toward Claire, from her seat of honor on the grass.

"Didn't I think to tell you Mr. Blennerhasset come up on the early train? Sammy, he drove down to the station himself to meet'm. Mr. Blennerhasset brought up all them grand things—for Mr. Ronald. Ain't he—I mean Mr. Ronald—a caution to've remembered the day? I been so took up with things over there to the great house, I musta forgot to tell you about Mr. Blennerhasset. Ain't everything just elegant?——

"It's pretty, the way the night comes down up here. With the sharp pin-heads o' stars prickin' through, one by one. They don't seem like that in the city, do they? An' the moon's comin' up *great!*"

Claire's eyes were fixed on the grassy slope ahead.

"Who are those three men over there?" she asked. "What are they doing? I can't make out in the dusk anything but shadow-forms."

"Sam, an' Mr. Blennerhasset, an'—an'—an-

other fella from the neighborhood. Mr. Blennerhasset he brought up some fire-works to surprise the young uns, an' they're goin' to set 'em off. It's early yet, but the sooner it's over the sooner to sleep. An' the kids has had a excitin' day."

Up shot a rocket, drawing the children's breaths skyward with it in long-drawn "A-ahs!" of perfect ecstasy.

Then pin-wheels, some of which, not to belie their nature, balked obstinately, refusing to be coerced or wheedled into doing their duty.

"Say, now, mother," cried Francie excitedly—"that pin-wheel—in the middle of it was a cork. When it got over spinning fast, I saw the cork."

"Don't you never do that no more," cautioned Martha. "Never you see the cork. It's the *light* you want to keep your eye on!" which, as Claire thought it over, seemed to her advice of a particularly shrewd and timely nature.

She was still pondering this, and some other things, when she felt Mrs. Slawson's hand on her shoulder.

"It's over now, an' I'm goin' to take the young 'uns in, an' put 'em to bed. But don't you stir. Just you sit here a while in the moonlight, an' enjoy the quiet in peace by yourself. You done a hard day's work, an' you give me an' Sammy what we won't forget in a hurry. So you just

stay out here a few minits—or as long as you wanter—away from the childern's clatter, an'—God bless you!"

Claire's gaze, following the great form affectionately, saw it pass into the darker shadows, then forth—out into the light that shone from the open door of the lodge.

"She's *home*—and they're *together!*" Unconsciously, she spoke her grateful thought aloud.

"Yes, she's *home*—and they're *together!*"

The words were repeated very quietly, but there was that in the well-known voice, so close at hand, that seemed to Claire to shake the world. In an instant she was upon her feet, gazing up speechless, into Francis Ronald's baffling eyes.

"You are kind to every one," he said, "but for me you have only a sting, and yet—I love you."

. . . . . .

Martha was still busy wrestling with the pyramid of dishes left over from the feast, when at last Claire came in alone.

"Did you get a chanct to compose yourself, an' quiet down some under the stars?" inquired Mrs. Slawson. "It's been a noisy day, with lots doin'. I don't wonder you're so tired—your cheeks is fairly blazin' with it, an' your eyes are shinin' like lit lamps."

"You knew—you knew he was here!" said Claire accusingly.

"*He?* Who? O, you mean Mr. Ronald? Didn't I think to tell you, he come up along with Mr. Blennerhasset? I been so flustrated with all the unexpected surprises of the day, it musta slipped my mind."

"I've seen Mr. Ronald!" Claire said. "I've spoken with him!"

"Now, what do you think o' that! Wonders never cease!"

"Do you know what I did?"

"Search me!"

"I told him—the *truth.*"

"We-ell?"

"And—*I'm going to marry him!*"

Mrs. Slawson sat down hard upon the nearest chair, as if the happy shock had deprived her of strength to support her own weight.

"No!" she fairly shouted.

"*Yes!*" cried Claire. And, O, Martha! I'm *so* happy! And—did you ever *dream* such a thing could possibly happen?"

"Well, you certaintly have give me a start. I often thought how I'd *like* to see Mr. Ronald your *financiay* or your *trosso,* or whatever they call it. But, that it would really come to pass——" She paused.

"O, you don't know how I dreaded next win-

ter," Claire said, as if she were thinking aloud. "I went over it—and I went over it, in my mind —what I'd do—where I'd go—and now—*Now!* . . . I couldn't take that fine job you had your eye on for me, not even if it had come to something. Don't you remember? I mean, the splendid job you had the idea about, that first night I was sick. I shan't need it now, shall I, Martha?"

"You got it!" said Martha.

Claire's wide eyes opened wider in wonderment. She stared silently at Mrs. Slawson for a moment. Then the light began to break in upon her slowly, but with unmistakable illumination.

"You—don't—mean?" she stammered.

"Certaintly!" said Martha.

THE END

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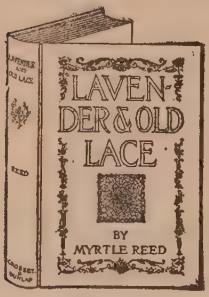

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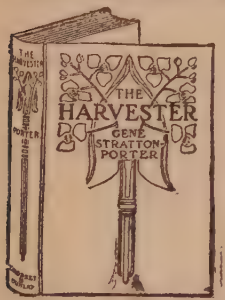

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